Strangers Until That Day

by StellarLibraryLady

Summary

One misty afternoon in early spring, six women stood on a corner in downtown St. Louis waiting for the light to change so they could cross the street. Fate had brought them, six strangers, to this spot at this time; Fate would deem that one of them would not live to step onto the opposite curb. From that moment forward, that fatal accident would be a watershed in the lives of the five survivors. They were strangers all. That is, strangers until that day.

Notes

Sometimes a character will take over a story when he (or she) is supposed to have equal emphasis with other characters. That happened with Barbara Crider in "Strangers Until That Day." Read more about Barbara's life as she crisscrosses America in "To Reflect the Sky."

See the end of the work for more notes.
More Precious Than Gold

I walk alone
Through the night and the misty rain;
I search each face
In the nameless crowd;
Waiting for the day
When you’ll come my way
To set my spirit free--
Please trust in me...
To love only you.

Can it be?
I’ve found you with me at last.
Can’t you see
You were meant for me?
This thing called love
Granted from above
Will make our lives complete--
No longer alone...
In this friendless world.

So little time
Will we walk in this old world;
So little time
To find true love.
I’m just someone,
An ordinary one,
With no ordinary love for you:
It’s kind of great...
How I feel about you.

Your trust in me
Is more precious than gold.
Your love to me
Is something I’d die for.
So take my hand
And understand
Just what you mean to me--
My darling, you...
Are more precious than gold.

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Prologue
One misty afternoon in early spring, six women stood on a corner in downtown St. Louis waiting for the light to change so they could cross the street. Fate had brought them, six strangers, to this spot at this time; Fate would deem that one of them would not live to step onto the opposite curb. And this incident would become a watershed to the other five. From that moment forward, they would place events in their own lives as happening either before or after that fatal accident.

The light changed to green and the mass of humanity surged forward. Cars streamed in the same direction as the pedestrians.

The arm of an elderly woman was jostled, causing her to drop her purse. She bent to retrieve it, silently cursing that she would probably have to wait until the next light because she’d never beat the red light now. Her arthritic knees were hurting, and she just wanted to reach her doctor’s office and rest.

A woman in her late twenties absently moved with the crowd. She wore a red plaid dress with a ruffled flounce around the skirt and a red bow in her long dark hair. Her body was in St. Louis, but her mind was back home in Tennessee. Daddy was now married to a woman closer to his age than her. Mama was prostrate with self-pity. The daughter hated being caught in the middle between her parents. And she also thought about the hometown she hadn’t seen in nearly ten years with its changes and with the jealousies of the people trapped there. She’d never guessed a visit home would stir up memories she’d thought were long buried. She’d never imagined that her past could disrupt her life so much now. All these things were bothering her, plus the incredible murder that was shaking the small hometown and the marriage proposal that had finally proven to be too much for her to accept. She couldn’t handle so many problems anymore. She’d needed this trip home?

A woman in her early forties grasped her briefcase and stepped carefully into the street. High heels weren’t practical on the slippery cement, but her mind was on the business meeting she’d just
attended. How lucky she was to have a husband who approved of her having a career! She knew he’d be happier with her waiting for him back home in California, but he was proud of her success and ability, too. Soon she would be home with him. She smiled to herself, and a man meeting her in the street noticed how exotically beautiful she was.

A middle-aged, frumpy woman pulled her old raincoat around her expansive frame and wished her stringy hair would stay in the bun at the back of her neck. She might be plain on the outside, but inside she was like the desirable women who populated the stories she edited for a woman’s romance magazine. Bitter disappointment over her own inability to write was making her brood again. She, who could see others’ writing errors, could not use that knowledge to produce her own fiction. She lacked the divine spark. The Muse did not smile on her. Now she knew how Tantalus felt when tempted by what he could never attain. But running away from her frustration wasn’t solving a thing. Here she was in St. Louis with no clue as to why she’d stopped in this city. Traveling wasn’t soothing her, but going back home to New York City seemed not very appealing to her, either.

A girl in her mid-teens but looking much younger gazed with wide-eyed innocence at the tall buildings, hopeful that she could relocate the bus station. These city people looked stern and frightened her. It was dangerous to talk to them. Evil lurked around every corner, but she’d been intrigued by the siren call of the city and had been lured into its streets. Now she had to find that bus station back, or she’d never reach Papa.

A woman in her early twenties reached the curb and headed for a phone booth. Whatever had possessed her to stop in St. Louis to see the sights? She’d been on her way to California to be with a man she hoped could love her. But on the plane she’d begun to have doubts. Perhaps he wanted to remain only friends, and interrupting her trip had been better than being disappointed. But now she was ready to call a taxi, catch another plane, and face her friend in California. Win, lose, or draw, it’d be settled.

The green light was growing stale, but traffic was moving slowly because of the slippery surface of the street. Other cars on the bisection streets waited their turns behind the red lights. The crosswalk was nearly empty of pedestrians.

The air was filled with honking and a car came careening through traffic. Walkers glanced idly around to see what the excitement was.

The exotic woman and the young girl hurried to reach the curb. The woman’s high heels slipped on the wet pavement. She struggled to catch her balance by grabbing the arm of the teenager. The girl gasped. A stranger had touched her! She shook off the grasping hand. The exotic woman slipped again and the car struck her with a solid THUNK!

A briefcase flew through the air, and papers that only a moment before had been considered important scattered in the wind.

The arthritic woman screamed and dropped her purse again. She knew that car!

The woman at the phone booth paused in her dialing to see what had happened. The woman in the red plaid dress was at her elbow and turned, also. They saw the frumpy, middle-aged woman hugging a street post and sobbing against it. But something else was there, something at the feet of the middle-aged woman, something that was attracting a stunned, but gawking crowd. Something that was wasn’t moving except for the pooling blood beneath it.

A moment later the young girl shot past the two women at the phone booth. The teen’s mouth was stretched wide in a silent scream. Her eyes were glazed and unseeing.
The car was swallowed up in traffic, only to crash into another vehicle three blocks away and kill both drivers. Several moments passed before the wails of emergency vehicles were heard in the distance, moments in which the horrified bystanders were both stunned and relieved. Any one of them could have been that strangely silent body lying on the wet pavement at their feet.

The telephone receiver dangled, forgotten, from its cord.

And so began an odyssey that would link the lives of the five survivors. They had journeyed here with different backgrounds and with different futures lying before them, but they would forever have one thing in common: the death of the sixth woman.

They were strangers all. That is, strangers until that day.
Barbara Crider opened her grainy feeling eyes, stared at the school pennants scattered across the opposite wall. A tennis racket leaned in a corner and an airplane model stood on a maple dresser. Oh, hell, she groaned. What man’s room was she in now?

She closed her eyes and tried to concentrate. The sheets felt buttery soft with the patina of old linen. No percale here. Barbara seemed to remember sinking gratefully into that softness and letting a sense of ‘home’ soothe her for the first time in a long time.

But where was this home? It didn’t feel like Montana or Los Angeles or even Springfield, Illinois. This felt different and alien, but much, much better than a motel.

Barbara cautiously reopened her eyes and studied the pennants. They were faded and had been undisturbed for years. The young man who’d once lived here had been lost to his adulthood long ago. College texts and children’s classics stood expectantly on a bookshelf, waiting for a man who had no further need of them. Even if he returned to this room of his youth, he would be a different person. The melancholy of the discarded room saddened Barbara.

Christ! she moaned and rolled over. I gotta get out of here. Now I’m feeling sorry for an inanimate object.

She found her clothes where she’d scattered them on the back of the no-nonsense wooden chair pushed under the scarred student’s desk. Then she sought out the bathroom at the end of the hall. Was she clairvoyant or did all big, old houses have the only second story bathroom at the end of the hall? For this was a big old house, and Barbara felt that it was located in some quaint, backwater town in the Eastern part of the United States. It didn’t quite feel like the seacoast. She figured a Rhode Island native like herself would always sense the nearness of the ocean, and it wasn’t here. An excitement stirred within her. It wasn’t here, but it was close. Closer than Montana or Springfield had been. But sadly, not as close as L.A. had been. Could anyone live closer to the ocean than Californians did? Hell, they practically lived IN the water!

Later, the dark walnut railing felt hard and cold under her hand as she descended the open stairway. The gloomy hall below wasn’t so dark as colorless. Bland wallpaper with a pattern that was barely existent rose to the ceiling from where it met somber dark wainscoting that descended from waist high to the polished wood floor beneath it. An uncomfortable looking loveseat glared menacingly at anyone who dared question the anachronism of its name. She doubted if lovers had ever spent time sitting on its thin cushion, but it did fill up that part of the lower hallway nicely. A pier mirror with a graceful Queen Anne table stood near the front door. And umbrella stand offered a choice of rain protection in somber shades of black and navy.

This hallway, like the one upstairs, was wide enough for another room. This house must be expensive to heat, Barbara thought as she glanced around at all of the open space taken up by the grand staircase. She could image, though, generations of brides in proper Victorian wedding gowns descending that stairway. The wedding would have been solemnized in the formal parlor with a reception in the library.

But she also felt that this house hadn’t seen grandeur like that in years. Instead, it slumbered in its old age while dreams of its days of glory swirled through its hallways like the swish of floor length gowns worn by ladies now long dead.

Either an old fashioned or a practical person lived here. Whoever it was, that person wanted to keep
alive the past through this cavern of a house now long past its prime.

A high, birdlike voice twittered from a door that opened to Barbara’s right. And Barbara thought, “Aunt Rose is on the telephone.”

Aunt Rose! Of course, that’s where she was: Aunt Rose’s home in central Pennsylvania.

Not that Rose Peabody really was her aunt. Rose’s late husband had been a first cousin to Barbara’s mother’s mother. Barbara wasn’t too sure exactly what relation Rose was to her, but at least her house should be safe to stay in. At least for awhile.

Barbara walked into the room that was either an office or a den. It had a heavy, masculine feel to it and had probably belonged to Rose’s late husband, Judge Walter M. Peabody whose portrait now glared down at Barbara from over an unlit fireplace.

Rose cradled the phone receiver. She was as small and birdlike as her voice. “Oh, you’re awake, dear! How did you sleep? Did you find everything okay?”

“I haven’t slept so well in years, Aunt Rose. And I found everything just fine.”

“But you haven’t had your breakfast yet! Come along into the kitchen and I’ll fix you some eggs and toast.”

“You don’t need to wait on me, Aunt Rose,” Barbara said as she dutifully followed her into the sunny yellow kitchen. What a nice departure from the rest of the somber house!

“Nonsense! I don’t mind a bit. Take a chair there like a good girl. I don’t have company stay over very often and this is so much fun. Thomas rarely comes to visit, anymore.”

“Thomas,” Barbara repeated as she watched Aunt Rose stir two eggs into a small skillet. “Is that his room I stayed in?”

“Yes. He practices law in Philadelphia and has little time to come home to visit his mama,” she lamented, then briskly dusted her hands. “But that’s what mamas have to get used to happening. Their little boys grow up to have lives of their own.”

“Does he have a family?”

“Two teenage daughters and a five year old son. His wife teaches in one of the high schools in their suburb. They’re all very busy people. That’s why your little visit is such a special treat. You will stay awhile, won’t you?”

“I’d certainly like to. And I’ll put something into the kitty to pay for my lodging.”

“I won’t hear of it!”

“Yes, you will, Aunt Rose. You’re a dear, sweet lady, and I’m not sponging off you. Besides, I’d pay a lot more at some motel and not feel half as much at home as I do here.”

“Well, if you insist—”

“I do.”

“Well, you best scoop up your eggs. They’re done now. And here’s your buttered toast.”

“Thank you. Will you join me in some second breakfast?”
“Oh, I can’t. I have to be running about for awhile, I’m afraid. I have to leave you alone. Will you mind much?”

“Oh, of course not,” Barbara answered. “I’m here to rest as much as anything else.” She nodded toward the window over the sink. “That’s a beautiful garden out there.”

“Oh, thank you. I’m afraid it’s old-fashioned to a fault. My mother-in-law Agnes Wentworth Peabody said that her mother-in-law started the garden as a bride. It’s mostly perennials that have been reseeding them for nearly a hundred years. I expect the soil is so tangled by old root systems that it would take a dynamite blast to loosen them! I just let them go on their merry way of living!”

“Well, I feel like I could just take root right with them. I think they would have all sorts of secrets to tell me.”

“I expect they would! They’ve seen a lot of living going on in this house.”

“Well, I sure I’ll feel right at home with their company. I want to get lost in their perfume and gossip.”

Rose patted her arm. “Then that’s what you need to do, my dear.” She moved toward the door. “Help yourself to the coffee or whatever you want in the frig. I’ll be back soon.”

“Thank you. Now, you run along and don’t worry about me. That garden will entertain me elegantly.”

And it did. Barbara settled in the lounge with a sigh and let the warm sunshine and dancing breezes wash over her. The air was heavy with the smells of blooming flowers. She gazed at the profuse blossoms and made a note to ask Aunt Rose what they were. There were so many things to learn, and she might as well start with flowers.

Perennials, Rose had said. Things with roots. And that’s what Barbara suddenly wanted. Roots. A home. A base. She wanted to be building toward a future. She wanted to be finished with the limbo that her life had been since high school graduation.

If Barbara had attended a four year college, she would’ve graduated last spring and been deep in some career by now. Instead, she’d followed her heart, done what she’d wanted with her young life, and now had nothing to show for it. Except memories. She smirked. Nobody can build a career on memories. Now, here she was at twenty-three, facing the decision of what to do with the rest of her life. Nobody can retire at twenty-three. And retire to what?

But she didn’t have to decide today. Her brain was still in a whirl and her body was exhausted. She needed somewhere to rest and reshape her thinking. Aunt Rose’s house was perfect. Nobody she knew would think of looking for her here. She and the money were safe, at least for awhile.

High summer was upon them. As Barbara sank into the mounting heat of the sunny day, images from her immediate past swam before her. She thought of Brad and Ray and of so many others she’d known. A car door slammed out in the street, or was that a locker from high school? A bee hummed as it journeyed from flower to flower, or was that rock-and-roll music she heard? So much confusion, so much paralyzing heat. She allowed the heat to envelop her, and images flowed freely as sleep rolled over her tired body.

Her dreams were twisted images of singing in a rock band in California, walking in the surf, and riding horseback in Montana. Again she saw Brad, the rock singer who’d been her lover; Miles, the
handsome actor who’d treated her like his sister; and Ray, the ugly cowboy who’d made her wish she was a better person.

She awoke with a start. A fine layer of sweat had popped out all over her. Would they never stop haunting her? Would those men never go away? She had a feeling that it would be a long time before she could forget her past.

In the long afternoons Barb healed in the garden of her aunt’s backyard. And she began to long for something to do. Her funds, still plentiful, would eventually falter. At last she was thinking about her future.

Barb took a part-time job so her aunt wouldn’t wonder about her finances. The doughnut shop smelled good and paid well for the few hours she worked. But more importantly, it offered Barb the chance to be around people again. Who would suspect that the pleasant, down home girl handing out doughnuts was the fugitive Bambi Love? She really wasn’t a fugitive, but she felt like one. After all, it had been her own money she’d taken. Wasn’t it?

Barbara was strangely discontented and restless. She was realizing that she’d missed part of her growing up years by insulating herself in the California rock scene. Her mother had been right about college. She should’ve gone right into higher education after high school.

Barbara didn’t fit in anywhere anymore. Most girls her age were either married with preschool children or launching careers or attending the college located in town. Since Barb had no husband and couldn’t qualify for a career with no advance degree, she began casting herself in the college scene. Clothing purchases began reflecting the mix and match sports clothes loved by endless generations of coeds.

But the mental college life was harder to don. She didn’t even try for the bubbly, air head appearance of some of the girls. She could never be that young again. Not after California. Nor did the intellectual cap fit, either. Her high school record was okay, but she’d never applied herself. Studies had come easily and she’d worked only hard enough to pass. And she’d probably learned what she’d studied, but without reinforcement, it was gone. But now she realized the lost opportunity really to learn. She wanted intellectual stimulation. After all of this time since high school graduation, her brain felt like a desert. She wanted to learn. But where to begin? The college term was in the middle of the semester. Besides, that whole collegiate scene put her off. She didn’t know if she’d fit in. Basically, she was afraid.

Barbara became a patron of the town library. She checked out Shakespeare’s King Lear and realized how inadequate her background was. The beauty of the poetry’s flow and the timeless story she nearly understood, but the phraseology puzzled her. The historical background, not only of Lear but of the playwright’s time, was important, but she knew she didn’t possess that knowledge.

Next came a Stephen King book. He seemed popular with young and old alike. And while he was much easier to read and understand, Barb was stunned by the horror he presented. But she was fascinated with his writing, too. It seemed to flow so effortlessly down the page. She checked out another book of his and, forgetting the story, eagerly began reading him for style. If only that guy would write about something less gruesome!

By happy chance, she next read a Steven Koontz. His horror wasn’t as graphic as King’s, but was as chilling because a lot of it was in the realm of possibility. And his writing style, while not as brilliant as King’s, still flowed. Barb felt that she was learning, but what?
Her next book choice was by one of the current well known lady writers of torrid literature. While Barb recognized the author’s name and title of the book, she was stunned by the contrast in writing styles. The scenes could titillate her, but the writing left her cold. She swore off that author for all time. Barb had learned something about taste, simply by reading.

Barbara sampled Sidney Sheldon, John Jakes, Janet Dailey, V.C. Andrews, Danielle Steele, James Michener, Louis L’Amour, Elmer Kelton, and went back to King and Koontz. She racked her brain for names from her literature classes and read earlier literary writers. F. Scott Fitzgerald’s works left a wistful, melancholy bubble of transient beauty that floated away with thinning skin to burst alone in some dark, gloomy corner. Hemingway’s novels were a brusque and vigorous picture of a man’s man. Thackeray’s characters were well drawn, but the prose was tedious. In fact, the further back she went in literature, the more ornate she found the styles. However much she loved Pride and Prejudice, she itched to red pencil the wordiness.

She stumbled across Agatha Christie and absorbed a whole list of classic English mysteries. Caring little for who-done-it, she delighted in character and setting. Next she saw Elizabeth Peters, Catherine Cookson, and Jean Plaidy. Finding Plaidy and her pseudonyms was a gold mine, and she was awed how the writer could change types of books to match her particular nom de plume.

Wanting expansion, Barb wandered into non-fiction and tackled Stephen Hawking’s A Brief History of Time. The brilliant scientist had popularized his subject, but the material was still unreadable to Barb because she lacked a solid scientific background. She returned the book and considered children’s science books. But the whole world of science seemed so far beyond her, and in only a few short years she had been left behind.

She knew she had to start smaller. She bought a book on vocabulary building and a Webster’s Collegiate dictionary. She began to read magazines that routinely came into the house: Time and Reader’s Digest. Another find was a yearly installment of the Almanac. She watched the evening news and read the New York Times with her aunt. And she discovered that scholarship was an acquired habit, something that an educated person stoked continually, not just through the years of schooling. Her aunt remained a twittering feather head, but Rose was an informed twittering feather head.

FACE THE NATION and SIXTY MINUTES became required viewing. Varied programs on educational television were constantly consumed. Barbara found she was interested in everything. Her mind was a desert and soaked up all knowledge that was being offered to it.

But Barb also realized that education needed to be regulated to be of any real value. That fall, she enrolled in the Liberal Arts college in town and began a program that would cover a wide range of courses besides the required general studies. Learning became a passion, and her intellect begin to blossom. Unlike the students enrolled for the social scene, Barbara wanted to learn for the sake of learning. At the moment she had no goals for her college education other than that.

She thrived in the scholastic atmosphere. She just like the stimulation of a college town. There was always something going on, either on campus or in the community at large. So many educated people lived here with so many lively interests that Barb was never bored. On the contrary, she was finding it difficult to limit her range of activities. There was enough intellectualism in any one square mile of this town to keep her busy for ten lifetimes.

Someday, she might want to look back on her California years and think about what had happened to her since she’d graduated from high school. But that searching hindsight was somewhere in her future. In fact, she might never want to indulge in that nostalgia. Already some of the events were growing fuzzy in her mind, and she was starting to confuse their order. Maybe that was the way
Nature intended. Maybe she should look only forward. Maybe she should just forget the past.

But she had a sneaking hunch that the past was not finished with her.

Spring was late that year in Pennsylvania and miserable with the changeable weather that offered rain one day and the threat of slushy snow the next. Barbara Crider contended herself with studies of ancient history, foreign cultures, and contemporary world problems. When she added up her total credit hours she would have earned after completing the current semester, she found that she could consider herself to be a junior with a Social Sciences major and a Literature minor.

She worked part-time at a gift shop downtown and had recently taken a few hours a week working at the college library. Her advisor had recommended she try Library School after graduation and work on a masters degree in library science. With her fields of study in the Fine Arts, her background would more than qualify her to aim for that career. Become a professional librarian? She didn’t know if she wanted to do that for the rest of her life. Still the work would be interesting, and the subject matter would cover all aspects of learning. That she would like. She’d always enjoyed the variety of electives that she had sampled, and her advisor knew that. Perhaps the advisor was pretty sharp to come up with an area in which anything a person has learned could be used.

She still lived with her Aunt Rose in the sprawling old house on the quiet residential street in the small Pennsylvania town where she’d stopped on a whim that long ago day when she was needing someplace to lay low for awhile. She had no friends, only acquaintances. And that lack didn’t bother her.

Barbara didn’t need people; she needed guidance. And the academic structure did that for her. Her main problem was no master plan for her future. And that should bother her, but it really didn’t. Life went by with a steady hum and that was all she required. Routine helped, and she noticed she’d always been most frustrated until some sort of routine had been established, no matter how bizarre to other people. It was her routine and she was satisfied. Besides, she wondered if a lot of other people didn’t fall through life after a comfortable routine had been formed.

She knew that she was vaguely waiting, waiting, waiting for something that would someday present itself to her. Until then, she would coast her way through life. Although she was in her late twenties, it really didn’t bother her that she wasn’t raising a family. With her own memories of a detached father and an inept mother, she’d never really known what sharing there could be in a close knit family that did things together. One cannot really miss what one’s never known.

Her parents were gone and she’d never been close to her childhood classmates back in Rhode Island. Sometimes, it seemed that only her years in California seemed real to her, and they had passed mostly in a numb fog. Her greatest adventures had come when she’d slipped away from her singing group and immersed herself in the company of strangers. There were people she’d known, mostly men, whom she’d like to touch base with again. And other times, she wondered if anyone really can ever recapture the past. She wondered if it’d be worth the effort. Everyone had moved on, including her. She might even be an embarrassment to those other people she had once known. Especially the men might not want to be seeing her again. She knew that there were some of the men that she hoped would never

Barbara also knew that at anytime she could bid Aunt Rose and the college goodbye, pack a few clothes, and drive away without a backward glance. She knew she could go to a new area, establish a different life, and leave that life also whenever she wished. She could do that routine over and over until she was an old lady, alone and without roots. And have no regrets. Was that normal, she wondered. Didn’t she owe herself more out of life than what a rolling stone would know?
She liked the collegiate atmosphere, but could academics become a substitute for living? Was she destined to be the world’s oldest undergraduate? And then, possibly, a professional librarian? Was this really the picture she had for herself? Could a career somewhere in some library really be a substitute for a family life?

It was as good as any other. And she was used to living this way. Beyond that, she really didn’t know. She didn’t ask much from life. She hoped it didn’t ask much from her.

Barbara settled in front of the television. When she’d heard that Miles Paxton Hughes was to be a presenter on this awards show, she decided to watch it. Generally, she passed this sort of thing up, but Hughes was pretty to look at. Besides that, he was a friend, someone she’d known, however slightly, in California.

Music videos had been playing on MTV while Barb read psychology cases that evening. She waited until the last fifteen minutes of the awards show to turn it on. Hughes was to present the last prize of the evening: the prestigious Life Achievement Award to someone who was known in both movies and television.

The network was just coming back from commercials. Cameras scanned the audience. Barb recognized many famous faces. Some looked like owls when the bright lights hit them.

A camera honed in on Luke Jeffers, emcee of the show and handsome star of a daytime soap opera. He flashed his manicured smile, and Barb could understand why so many lonely women were hooked on him.

“We’re back. What a night we’re having tonight, ladies and gentlemen. What a show! We’ve honored some mighty special people so far, and we’re not through yet! No, sir! No, ma’am!” He grinned through the applause. “And, now, the biggie. To present this year’s Life Achievement Award is the star of television’s blockbuster hit, TALLAHASSEE TWISTER, Miles Paxton Hughes!”

A suave, athletic man in his middle thirties bounced onto stage to thunderous applause, and Barbara’s heart gave a tug. He certainly was looking good. He shook hands with Luke Jeffers, and the stage sizzled with so much male animal magnetism that the cameras fairly crackled with it.

Jeffers moved aside and Hughes turned to the audience. The copper of his trademark auburn hair gleamed in the brilliant lights. His chocolate brown eyes simmered with straight forward friendliness, but a hint of mischief flickered underneath. It was an open, animated face that people instinctively trusted. He was either the boy next door or a great con artist. Hughes basked in the recognition of his fans. And as he smiled his famous boyish grin and the twin dimples appeared in his cheeks, the hearts of millions of female watchers skipped a beat. What a heartthrob!

“Thank you, ladies and gentlemen,” Miles said. “And Blaine Carmody says you’re more precious than gold.”

At the mention of both his character on TALLAHASSEE TWISTER and the name of his surprising hit record recording, the audience exploded with praise and applause. What had been so surprising about Hughes’s song was nobody realized that he could sing, least of all Hughes. But the syrupy lyrics became the theme song of TALLAHASSEE TWISTER, and the blend of tender sentiment and romantic playfulness from the tough investigator Miles portrayed was an irresistible combination. Men wanted to be him, and women just plain wanted him. It was a character made in Heaven for a man who character hinted that he really had been bred in Hell. His character and the show were
Cameras panned among the well known faces in the audience and paused on Sean Murphy, veteran actor and Hughes’s co-star of HARRINGTON-PRICE, an action series they’d filmed nearly ten years before. Murphy was grinning with delight at Hughes’s popularity. Sean’s eyes were wreathed in wrinkles, but the pure Irish blue of them twinkled with ageless joy. Murphy had been responsible for Hughes being pulled from an obscure role in a daytime soap opera to appear as his co-star. Hughes had been eternally grateful for the chance, and his fans had been eternally grateful for all that Murphy had done to help Hughes along in his career.

Actually, Murphy’s wife had spotted Hughes first. Melana Clerke-Jones sat proudly beside Murphy, a man nearly twice her age. She was an interesting mixture of Dutch Boer and black African, daughter of a university professor in Cape Town, South Africa, who was ostracized by blacks and whites alike. Rebelling as teens often do, Melana had refused to finish college and took a secretarial job doing temporary work to support her first love, acting. She was a mediocre actress, but a marvelous dancer. Occasionally, a starlet is seen by the right person, and Melana was lucky that a big break sent her to Madagascar to appear in an action film being shot by an American film company. Murphy played an embittered sailor who beats a young dancer to death. Melana played the dancer.

Sean hadn’t expected to find love in Madagascar. His first marriage was finished, he had two children to raise, and his career was in a slump. The action movie with a third banana role for him seemed a step down, but his agent assured him that he needed this movie. Besides, he would be working. And Sean Murphy was always interested in being employed as an actor.

Madagascar was a hellhole to Sean, but meeting Melana Clerke-Jones lightened Sean’s misery. The problems of the characters they were portraying lapped over into their personal lives, and Sean and Melana barely managed to part company amiably when the movie was completed. They assumed they’d never meet again, and then Melana arrived in Hollywood to do publicity for their film. She and Sean resumed their friendship under rocky conditions. They soon became inseparable companions, found that friendship had mysteriously deepened into something more, and finally married because nothing else made sense to either one of them anymore.

In the following years, Sean found steady work in movies and then television. He gained the reputation for being a reliable, if not exciting, actor. His name on the marquee assured audience turnout. Fans trusted his solid image of impeccable honesty and quiet strength. He was tailor made for Western roles and television fathers, second leads and character roles. In short, he was capable of everything and proved it every time he stood in front of a camera.

That’s why his series with Miles Paxton Hughes came as such a surprise. No two diverse characters in television history could be remembered. Hughes’s character, a cultured beach bum and sometime detective with a shady past, is forced by exposure to a dangerous virus to collaborate with Murphy’s character, a scientist with the only known antidote for Hughes’ condition. In return for the antidote, Hughes must see that Murphy, a voyeur for adventure, is allowed to participate in Hughes’s investigative cases. Initially not liking the hold each has over the other, they gradually become reluctant friends.

At first the action drew fans, and then the development of the characters intrigued people who liked more than the show’s squealing tires in chase scenes. Hughes and Murphy truly liked each other, both on and off camera, and that warmth shown through the television screen. When the series ended after only two short season, connoisseurs clamored for more shows. Film lovers viewed the series, episode by episode, in reruns and saw not the action but the give and take of two people becoming inseparable friends. Despite differences in age and background interests, two diverse personalities found a common ground. Psychiatrists loved the unfolding relationship for its psychological basis.
Lay people simply loved the stories.

And now Miles Paxton Hughes was presenting the Life Achievement Award for excellence in both
motion picture and television fields. The Barrymore was named for an acting family who’d been
diverse in several acting areas, so it was fitting that the award should designate versatility. Since
Hughes was presenting the award, speculation had run high that Sean Murphy would receive it. But
Hughes might simply have the pleasant task since his was a top rated show and he was a popular
actor. Heaven knew there were other deserving actors and actresses beside Sean Murphy.

Sean glanced at Melana, and she could see how nervous he was. This would be such a coup if he
could win this award at the peak of his popularity, instead of waiting until he was senile or dead. She
gave him a small smile of encouragement which he accepted with a deep, ragged sigh of gratitude.
Sean turned his attention back to the stage, but Melana continued to gaze at his dear, rugged face.
Sometimes, the realization that he belonged to her brought her up short. And there were other times,
times she didn’t like to think about when a frown would crease her lovely forehead as she realized
she was having trouble remembering what he looked like. But then the warmth of his personality
would overwhelm her, and she would sigh in contentment. It wasn’t only his dear face she loved,
although she would most certainly miss the familiarity of it or the rest of his hulking presence if he
were suddenly gone from her life. No, it was his intense cussedness simmering just below an ill
disguised placid surface that fascinated her.

She and Sean didn’t always agree and argued as if driven by banshees. At times like that, they didn’t
really like each other very much. But they always loved each other. If they had not been sure of that
love, they would’ve stayed only polite acquaintances. Those things, plus the knowledge that she had
the power to make him happy or sad in the way that she treated him appealed to her. But that
weakness in a powerfully built man did not make him less in her eyes. Instead, his vulnerable quality
made them strong as a couple. She knew that he needed her as much as she needed him.

Melana had first seen his strength in weakness when they were shooting the movie LIBERTALIA in
Madagascar. How valiantly he had struggled to remain her friend as the attraction between them had
grown. He had thought that a relationship between them was all wrong. He’d thought they had
nothing in common. At first they hadn’t, but then they became friends.

One of the turning points had been the mad escapade that led them to ‘borrowing’ an airplane and
flying to Cairo to see the Pyramids. Getting in trouble with the local government had united them
into a friendship that each thought would be short lived.

Melana still valued their friendship, even if it finally proved to be more than short lived. She was
proud to be his wife and prouder still that he wanted her by his side at this important awards’ night.
Recently, she had been plagued with the idea that they wouldn’t be together very much longer. He
was, after all, quite a bit older than she was, and she had to be realistic. That didn’t mean that she
liked the idea of widowhood, but she knew that with every passing day the time for their final
separation was getting closer. Time was not their friend.

She placed a gloved hand on his arm and rubbed his tensed muscles gently. He glanced back at her,
winked, and turned his attention back to the stage.

A quick shot showed Sean again, his face grinning at Hughes. Sean’s white hair glistened in the
bright lights. Quite rightly he was the sentimental favorite.

The camera switched back to Hughes’s grinning face, and Barbara thought back to that time she’d
once spent a weekend with Miles Paxton Hughes. A handsome puppet for his fans, she thought, and
they don’t realize his depths. Perhaps Sean Murphy did. Barb hoped so, because Hughes idolized
Murphy so much. She realized that hadn’t been true with the start of their series. The two men had
learned to become friends much as their characters had.

A sad smile shadowed Barb’s face. Yes, she’d spent a weekend with Miles Paxton Hughes. But wouldn’t his fans be amazed that she and Miles had slept in separate bedrooms. And wouldn’t they be more stunned that the only way he’d touched Barb was through her mind, but that touch had changed her forever.

Knowing Miles had not been all that electrifying. In fact, the opposite was generally true. There were days and weeks that Barb forgot about him completely. But then something would remind her of him, such as his picture in a magazine, a romantic song on the radio, or simply his name echoing in her mind, and the feeling of that long ago weekend was back with her again. The memory of Miles was an anchor, a haven, a quiet spot in her soul. He was foolish and sentimental, and much of what he’d babbled to her that weekend was impractical. But Barb had seen a foundation in his words, a skeleton that could be built upon. Barb liked thinking that she could always return to Miles, and they could pick up where that long ago weekend had ended. The possibility was always back there in her past waiting for her to redeem it. Everyone needed an ace in the hole, a salvation, and Miles was hers.

But not yet, not quite yet. Some instinct told her to wait. The time was not right. Not yet.

Barb tensed as the television cameras centered on Miles again. My, he looked handsome!

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Miles told the audience that had quieted at last. “I am here tonight to present the Life Achievement Award to one of our peers who has made a sizable contribution to the legacy of motion picture and television history. The Barrymore signifies a versatility to perform in both fields and thereby recognizes this considerable display of talent. Our recipient has accomplished this distinction, and much more. The person we honor was born into the legitimate theater, but like a lot of other young men chose to fight for his country in the Second World War. Returning home, he looked around for work. His father, by then a famous Hollywood actor himself, urged his son to try acting. Luckily for us,” Hughes said with a wry grin, “he chose to follow that sage advice.”

The camera showed Sean Murphy, his face tight with tension. Miles could be talking about him, or about several other actors his age.

“Our honoree was readily accepted in Hollywood and appeared in westerns, comedies, and action pictures. From there, he branched into television with several hit series.” Miles’ eyes roamed the crowd and gave no hint of the secret he knew. “Among these series were—” His twinkling eyes rested on Sean Murphy and his mouth twitched slightly. “—FLANAGAN’S CLAN—”

Sean Murphy guffawed. His eyes flashed at Melana as she squeezed his hand. The audience cheered and applauded wildly. FLANAGAN’S CLAN had been a huge success for Sean.

Miles was grinning openly at Sean Murphy. “—DALTON CORNERS—”

The applauding intensified for Sean’s current half-hour comedy on network television.

Miles held up his hand and the applause abated slightly. “—and, of course, my personal favorite, HARRINGTON-PRICE!”

Another wave of applause rolled over the amphitheater.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Miles yelled after the crescendo of approval subsided. “May I present the recipient of this year’s Life Achievement Award, my very dear friend and former co-star, Sean Murphy!”
The applause was thunderous as Sean pushed himself to his feet and heartily acknowledged it. Melana pulled him down for a kiss, and then he was lumbering toward the stage.

Miles hugged Sean and they exchanged words unheard by the audience, but the gleam of mutual admiration was unmistakable on their faces. Sean turned to the mike and Miles turned to move aside, but Sean pulled him closer.

“Don’t go. You’re my luck. You got this for me.”

“You got it for yourself, big guy. Now accept it.” Miles moved aside.

Sean glanced at his audience. “Not one word does he tell me. Three days of surf fishing together this week, and not one peep does he say to me. Well, I appreciate it, Pax. I know how you must’ve been busting to tell me.”

Miles mumbled something incoherently and nodded.

“He says he was threatened with death if he told,” Sean repeated.

The audience laughed. Miles said something else not picked up by the microphone.

“Really?” Sean grinned at him, then turned to the audience and jerked a thumb toward Miles. “I get the award and he’s bawling.”

“I’m proud of you, Sean.”

Again they had to embrace to thunderous applause, then the camera fixed on Sean. Miles’s arm was seen in the corner of the picture.

“Thanks, folks. I’m glad you care about me, and I’m glad you care about the kid here, too. You know, there’s a high school math teacher back in Teaneck, New Jersey, who shares his wonderful son with me. I don’t know if I could be that generous. Especially with this one. He’s special to me. But, I suppose you already know that.” He grinned as the audience acknowledged their friendship.

“That’s one way Adam Price in HARRINGTON-PRICE is different from me. We both like this character here, but I’m not afraid to admit it. Miles has done a lot for me. And I’d like to acknowledge that. He helped me bring facets of myself out to a camera that I had never been trusting enough to expose for anyone else. That’s why Adam Price is so convincing.

“I’ve been lucky in my career, ladies and gentlemen. There’s always been someone there to help me. I owe a lot to other people too numerous to mention, so I won’t. Not because I’m ungrateful, I just don’t want to forget someone. You know who you are, and I thank the Almighty every day that you’ve been a vital part of my life. But if I forget to mention my wife, I won’t get back in the house tonight.”

The audience laughed as Sean grinned out into the audience to where she was sitting, and the camera picked up Melana out of the crowd. She laughed and blew him a kiss.

“I love you, honey,” he said with sparkling eyes and a soft smile on his face. “Thank God that you love me, too. You’re the greatest thing that’s ever happened to me. Even if you do snore.”

Melana wiped away happy tears and laughed with the audience.

Sean sobered. “One other person stands out, and I’d be remiss if I didn’t thank my father, God rest his soul. He urged me to get into this business and to stay in it, and a marvelous life it has been for me, too. I’ve had a little sorrow, it’s true. But a lot of happiness has come my way, too. I share this
award with my wife Melana and my children Molly, Stephen, Billy, and Iris.” He glanced off camera. “But I’m not sharing it with you, Pax. Do you know why?”

Miles’ lips were seen to utter ignorance as he shook his head.

“Because someday you’re going to win one of these things for yourself. You’ve got what it takes, and you’re going to make it big. And I hope that I’m around to present it to you. But I’m warning you right now. I’ll be just as nice to you as you were to me. I won’t tell you anything beforehand, either! Be prepared to sweat it out, buddy!”

Miles and the audience laughed. Then Miles had to hug him again to applause. Sean was seen to say something into Miles’s ear. When they untangled themselves, tears were running down Miles’s face.

“I don’t get it, folks,” Sean said with a puzzled look on his face. “All I said was that I forgot to put him on the list with my children.”

Miles turned away.

Sean smiled at Miles warmly. “Good thing I didn’t,“ Sean quipped. “He’s going to be dehydrated by the time this show is over. If he was standing closer to me, he’d be shrinking my suit jacket.“

The audience laughed with the good-natured teasing, but many felt tears stinging their eyes. Not many guys in show business were as open about their mutual love for each other. Most other relationships were marred by jealousy and self-interest and good camera angles.

Then with a serious face Sean looked back at the audience. “This is a solemn occasion, too, and I shouldn’t be forgetting that.” He studied the award and looked into the audience. “I am dedicating this award to the memory of my father, William Murphy. He knew acting and passed it on to me. I’ll eventually hand it over to guys like Pax here. Then someday he’ll be the old, white-haired geezer up here passing the torch to some bright eyed, eager kid. And he’ll be thinking of all his memories on that night, just as I am now. And he’ll be hoping he helped the craft of acting along, just as I am now. That’s what it’s all about, folks. We learn a little, and we add it to the pot. Acting’s a wonderful career, and I’m glad it’s been my life.” He acknowledged the applause rippling through the audience.

“Thank you. Thank you. And thank you. But let me say that the pleasure’s been all mine.” He blew them a kiss. “Goodnight!”

Sean held the Barrymore aloft and his eyes shone brightly. Then he and Miles walked arm in arm off the stage to wild applause.

The announcer immediately ended the show and the credits began to roll. The late night news started, but Barbara clicked off the TV and stared at it.

She had been strangely moved. Because she’d once known Miles, however briefly it had been, she felt close not only to him, but to Sean, too. The simple feeling between the two men appealed to her in a strange, haunting way. And she knew that this was something she had always hungered for, but didn’t realize it until it had been so blatantly showcased for her to see. They were a family, and she wanted to be part of that family. Not just any family, but THAT family.

She was intellectually aware enough to know that it had also been showcased for the whole audience, not just her. She knew on some level that the fellowship had also appealed to every other lonely person who had watched the show and who wanted to be part of something, even vicariously. Wasn’t that the draw of every movie, every fictional story, hell, every romantic song that had ever been written? Somebody out there had wanted to be part of something, and some writer out there had obligingly provided it.
But, still, Barbara felt sure that she had more than the vicarious living by most of the audience. After all, she had spoken to both men. And she had an identity with Miles Paxton Hughes that most people didn’t have, even those who had known him for years.

Because she wanted to continue that feeling of warmth from the awards show, Barbara watched Murphy’s show and Miles’s show that week. Apparently other people felt the same way, as the two shows enjoyed high ratings that next week.

DALTON CORNERS, Sean’s show, aired on Monday evenings at eight o’clock. It was a half-hour, gentle family comedy set in a dwindling, gone to seed, country crossroads village that had once been a thriving market place for surrounding farmers. The whole town looked like Time had passed it by. Empty, paint challenged buildings stood amid vacant lots and marked once populous streets. Years before, trains shipped grain and prime livestock to market and were the main means of travel in an area with few automobiles and no paved roads. Now some impersonal railroad employee simply tossed the mail toward the depot and gathered mail sacks with a hook as abbreviated, little used trains roared past the little hamlet.

A big morning event in town, though, was watching buxom Neva Armstrong, the postmistress, stomp across the road to the depot to retrieve the mail. Then came the excitement of going to the post office later to see if that package had finally come from Sears & Roebuck or if there was a postcard from the vacationers out in Colorado.

A few other stores struggled to stay open, although there wasn’t much business taking place in any of them. When the present employers died or closed the store, no one would step forward and re-open the emporium, although all of the businesses had once enjoyed humming and brisk trade. The population had dwindled with young people heading for the cities. And old people just don’t need ‘stuff’ the way they once did. Lillie Barnes still kept open the dry goods store her father had run for many years, but the stock had yellowed with age and the store itself had faded. A feed and grain near the elevator still did some business with the few farmers in the area who owned feeder cattle and a flock of chickens. A gas station and diner out by the super highway did better business, but a lot of it was from local people.

But here at Dalton Corners, the hub of the settlement was George Dalton’s Grocery Store. George’s great-grandfather established the town and the store, and George is doing his best to keep both the store and the town alive. Old cronies still gathered here in the morning for a marathon pitch game and to chew the fat of the latest gossip. George (Sean Murphy) sliced lunch meat for sandwiches consumed by these old patrons on the premises. He relayed local news and was a father confessor for anyone who needed an understanding ear. (Barbara thought Sean’s character resembled the one he’d played in FLANAGAN’S CLAN, the western series he’d done on television years before. She shrugged philosophically. If the formula worked, why mess with it?)

Another big event was when the town school bus dispersed the community’s children who have been shipped to classes in the larger town six miles away. The community’s brick schoolhouse had long since closed its doors when the area was consolidated into the larger school district. Everyone was saddened when Dalton Corners lost its elementary school due to poor enrollment. The building is now used to store old household appliances discarded by local residents. A retired electrician has plans to restore the old appliances to working order. Whoever would want these cobbled over appliances has yet to step forward, but the old electrician still dreams of this rehabilitation as he meanders through the moldering graveyard of old metal and electrical coils.

Matrons tend small gardens and old women reminisce through old photo albums and cedar chests. Occasionally they gather at the small tea room that Lillie Barnes has established in the dry goods store. It really isn’t a business because Lillie serves tea fixed with tea bags and sweet rolls purchased
at the grocery store. But it provides the ladies with a place to gossip similar to the men who meet at the grocery store.

Young farmers blaze through town with their high priced farm equipment, and teenagers roar through with their souped-up pickups sporting roll bars and huge tires. The young are planning how to leave as the old try to hang onto the life they’ve known.

All segments of village life either pass through or pass by the Dalton Store and are commented on by the Greek chorus around the card table at the grocery store. Gentle humor pervades, but sometimes outright bawdiness explodes. Oftentimes, sorrow touches the lives of these men. And, occasionally, a tragedy strikes. But these are seasoned men who’ve seen much of life, and they can roll with the punches. They realize the sadness that Life is passing them by, but they also relish the life they’ve seen, are seeing, and hope to continue to see.

George Dalton, about whom the stories center, is mildly attracted to a widow trying to run a nearby farm and deal with a rebellious teenage son and a precocious tomboy preteen daughter. A retired school teacher living alone in Banker Wilson’s old mansion has a love of gardening and of continued learning. She also has George’s eye. George likes both ladies, but he basically still grieves for his wife who died several years before. She was the love of his life.

George’s daughter and son-in-law living in a distant city are always trying to get him to sell the grocery and move closer to them so he can enjoy his grandchildren and see the larger world. But he knows that if he leaves, the town of Dalton Corners will die. Maybe not at first, but the heart of it will be taken away. Also, he suspects that he will die if he leaves his home.

Yes, nothing much happened in Dalton Corners, but the daily rituals of its inhabitants comprised their lives and gave them all structure. That daily pattern of life was what made millions of television viewers feel that they had revisited something from their pasts. Nostalgia was the show’s basic appeal. That, and the gentle cycle of stories and lives chronicled.

When the television show ended, Barbara sat stunned as its simple theme song played behind the rolling of credits. She had never really seen the show before. She understood its charm now and hoped its ratings would stay healthy. There had been talk of canceling the series, but Sean’s award should surely pump new life into it. Sean was a perennial favorite, and any series done by him should surely be touched by his grace and durability.

Barbara had to wait until Thursday evening at nine o’clock to see Miles’s series, TALLAHASSEE TWISTER. This was an hour long dramatic series set in the sand and sun of Florida. The Tallahassee Twister is a nightclub owned by Blaine Carmody (Miles Paxton Hughes) and his widowed aunt who insists on being called Mother by everyone except her boyfriend, the Chief of Police Beau Ryker. The nightclub attracts all segments of society, and it is a great place to watch criminals and provide a showcase for guest singers and stars.

Blaine secretly works undercover for the Chief, much to the chagrin of a regular police detective who is thrown together with Blaine a lot. Blaine skirts just along the edge of the Law which torments the police detective who is determined to pin a crime on him. Blaine always fixes the outcome of the story so the detective gets credit, partly to keep him off balance and partly because he likes him. The police detective secretly likes to spend time at the glamorous nightclub because his home life is so hectic. He has a feminist working wife, two smart-mouth children, and a retired father who advocates Gray Power. The detective reluctantly admires Blaine and his life style, but won’t admit it. Several times Blaine has saved the detective’s life, but lets the credit go to someone else. The detective does not realize how indebted he is to Blaine.

A young woman working in the District Attorney’s office would like to discredit Blaine, too, and
they have a running on-again, off-again romance. She is brusque and efficient, but Blaine with his charm brings out her feminine side.

The nightclub also has weekly regulars. Peppy, a Cuban busboy, is a willing and cheerful ‘go-fer’ for Blaine. He and his extended family provide some light moments in the show. A young black waitress working her way through college to earn a degree in sociology and psychology suspects that Blaine is a better person than the card dealing gigolo he portrays at the club. He flirts with her, but respects the relationship she has with a black taxi driver. Occasionally, Blaine checks in with his ex-sister-in-law who is raising his four-year-old daughter. Someday, he may marry his dead wife’s sister, but right now she reminds him too much of his lost wife. Besides, his sister-in-law was never too happy with her sister’s choice because she believes he isn’t a good person. But sometimes she thinks he’s more decent than he lets on.

While the action centers around the night life at the club, Blaine travels far beyond the nightclub sometimes. Stories have taken him to Miami, Okefenokee, and even Havana. And while dramatic, there are many moments of sophisticated parties and family fun. Stories generate spontaneously from such a premise.

But perhaps the greatest charm of the series was that the audience fully felt that it participated in the adventures. Men viewers walked in Blaine’s shoes, feeling dapper, daring, and clever. And even though Blaine romanced the regular young women on the show and an occasional guest star, his real love interest was each woman viewer. And each woman viewer responded with loyalty and increased heartbeats.

Sex appeal explained the show’s popularity and the attraction of the show’s theme song. Miles, in raincoat with upturned collar, walked through a rainy night in Tallahassee while melancholy jazz music blared in the background. He stopped under a streetlight and sang his lament. Any reasonable person would criticize the sappy setup, but the audiences loved it. Syrupy lyrics and off-key singing mattered little when Miles gazed steadily into the camera and toasted his listeners with promises of love hidden in his heart:

I walk alone
Through the night and the misty rain;
I search each face
In the nameless crowd;
Waiting for the day
When you’ll come my way
To set my spirit free--
Please trust in me...
To love only you.

Can it be?
I’ve found you with me at last.
Can’t you see
You were meant for me?
This thing called love
Granted from above
Will make our lives complete--
No longer alone...
In this friendless world.
So little time
Will we walk in this old world;
So little time
To find true love.
I’m just someone,
An ordinary one,
With no ordinary line for you:
It’s kind of great...
How I feel about you.

Your trust in me
is more precious than gold;
Your love to me
is something I’d die for.
So take my hand,
and understand
Just what you mean
to me:
My darling, you
are more precious than gold.

A collective sigh was heard from living rooms all over America, especially from the one where Barbara sat watching. Aunt Rose was at a card party and Barbara had the house to herself. At ten till nine she settled into a comfortable chair with a bowl of popcorn and the television guide.

But when TALLAHASSEE TWISTER came on, especially that song, Barbara sat up in her chair and shoved the popcorn bowl aside. She didn’t move for over an hour. Even commercials didn’t bring her out of her euphoria. She was glad she hadn’t been a fan of the show before she had met Miles Paxton Hughes.

The credits started and Miles began to sing. Behind the super-imposed credits were clips from previous shows: Miles smiling, Miles angry, Miles fighting, Miles arguing with the police detective, Miles, Miles, Miles....

Later, Barbara couldn’t remember the story line of that evening’s show. All that she was aware of was Miles talking, Miles moving around the set, Miles being utterly charming. It was as if she were holding the script and rehearsing him in his role, much as she’d rehearsed him years before in that HARRINGTON-PRICE show. She felt more like a director than a viewer.

When the show ended, she sat staring at the screen. The next show interfered with her thoughts, so she turned on a channel showing static. Turning off the television would’ve destroyed her reverie. She was contented simply to stare into the middle foreground of the room, and let life washed around her. That’s where Aunt Rose found her sometime later. Puzzled, Rose turned off the grinding television. Barbara blinked as though awakened from a mesmerizing dream and could give no explanation to Aunt Rose for her trance. Rose sent her to bed, but for hours Barbara lay awake staring at the darkened ceiling over her head. Miles’s face grinned down at her and his eyes sparkled. She could see them as clearly as she’d seen them on the television screen earlier that evening.

This wasn’t happening! She should never have watched that awards show. Now her interest in Miles had been piqued, and she felt like a foolish teenager who had developed a hopeless crush on a popular movie idol.
But Barbara couldn’t help it. She who’d allowed herself to be numb to life for so long was now clutching to the hope that Miles could bring life to her. She knew the only person who could really do that was herself, but he had promised. He had promised that they were soul mates and would walk the stars together. Was she stupid enough to believe his foolish talk, or did she think that it wasn’t foolishness? Did he speak the truth? Their truth? Did she really believe in him?

In the days that followed, she tried to recreate that weekend with Miles, but she had trouble thinking clearly. Did the real man correspond in any way to the person she was dreaming about? Was he merely the recreation of some writer’s mind and Miles’s acting ability?

Barbara scoured television schedules and discovered a cable channel that showed reruns of HARRINGTON-PRICE twice a night. The show became must-watching for her. Never before had she watched the series in continuous sequence, and she realized more than ever how the show chronicled the development of a friendship. She watched for nuances in character and shared the warmth between the men.

By watching the series, she rediscovered the Miles she had known years before. When the episode aired that she’d rehearsed with him, she felt her skin prickle. Again she viewed TALLAHASSEE TWISTER and wondered if she could recognize Miles as he was now. By the airing of the third TALLAHASSEE TWISTER, she was sure she could.

By now, she had inundated herself with thoughts of Miles. He said that they walked in dreams together. Even though she had no conscious remembrance of doing that, could there be any reason why they didn’t? Who knew what our minds do while we are asleep. If Miles believed in the possibility of their doing just that, couldn’t that be enough belief for both of them?

Perhaps it was only just pretty words he’d told her. Perhaps he’d forgotten about her the moment she drove away. Perhaps he would consider her to be merely what she appeared to be: an obsessive fan. Perhaps she was only wasting her time.

She chose to think otherwise. And now was the time to return to California before she lost her nerve. She’d never felt so much enthusiasm in her life.

This is stupid, she told herself as she watched reruns of HARRINGTON-PRICE night after night and caused Aunt Rose to wonder about her new obsession. This is stupid, she told herself as she listened to MORE PRECIOUS THAN GOLD on an easy listening radio station and shivered at the song’s promises. This is stupid, she thought as she bought an airline ticket to Los Angeles.

This is really stupid, she told herself as the jet streaked her ever westward. She was going to a man who might have forgotten that she existed. She was headed for a future and a destiny that might not really exist, after all.

At St. Louis, she deplaned to see the sights. Actually, she wasn’t that interested in St. Louis. The plane was moving her too fast. California was zooming toward her in a headlong rush. Common sense was nagging at her to think clearly before making a fool of herself to Miles Paxton Hughes. Actually, she was developing cold feet and needed to warm them a bit on solid ground. Maybe she just needed some time for common sense to take over her reasoning.

And to walk the streets of St. Louis would give her time to think back again to that time when she’d met Miles Paxton Hughes. Maybe here in the neutral surroundings of a strange city, she could be more objective with her thoughts.
She just wished it wasn’t raining. The streets of downtown St. Louis were slick with the greasy moisture on them, and the group of women on the street corner with Barbara seemed wrapped up in themselves. Oh, well, wasn’t she, too?

Oh, Miles, am I really doing the right thing by coming to you?!
Sean Murphy stared out the window of the taxi that was racing him through the streets of Tananarive, Madagascar. He might as well have been placed on a distant planet. Nowhere he’d ever been in his forty odd years had ever looked so foreign to him. Hell, up until two months ago, he’d never even heard of Tananarive. Elementary school geography had taught him about the existence of a large island named Madagascar off the southeast coast of Africa. But like the Moon and Antarctica, Sean had never expected to go there. None of them had ever been high on his destinations to visit list. He’d had no desire to see any of those places. But for the next few weeks, this strange island was to be his home.

Sean Murphy was an American television and movie star fast approaching middle age. His blonde hair and blue eyes reflected his Irish heritage as did his famous temper. Like his acting father before him, Sean was known for his ability to turn in a good performance. He was reliable and welcomed all roles, whether he was the star or not.

Sean sighed. He supposed that was one reason why he now found himself in this obscure corner of the planet. His television series FLANAGAN’S CLAN was in hiatus after its second successful season. It’d been renewed for another year, and Sean was taking his vacation from it by appearing in a movie set halfway around the world from his home in California. ‘Vacation’ to him was working.

In FLANAGAN’S CLAN Sean played the father confessor to an assortment of roughneck children, oddball relatives, deserving orphans, hard working cowhands, and straight-laced townsfolk living on or near his Montana ranch late in the Nineteenth Century. The episodes were filled with humor, adventure, heartaches, quarrels, fist fights, and tragedy. A crisis nearly every minute needed to be mediated by Sean’s character. “FATHER KNOWS BEST on the prairie,” Sean had been heard to mutter about his show. Actually, it was a hybrid between that series, THE VIRGINIAN, and a Jerry Lewis movie in one of its madder moments.

The series might’ve meant mayhem, but it was successful and Sean didn’t mean-mouth prosperity. While some actors could turn their backs on a series because of fractured ideals or artistic stagnation, Sean sunk his teeth into a role and hung on. He’d been in the business long enough to know principles don’t fill a dinner plate. Being visible in a long-running series was better than being out of work and principled. Acting was his life; he’d be lost without it. He’d be HUNGRY without it, in more ways than one. Not that he was ruthless or uncaring, he was merely being practical. Besides, he had children to raise and a costly divorce to maintain. He identified strongly with Sandy Flanagan, his character on the series, and hoped he was half as good at fathering as Flanagan was.

When other actors took real vacations during their series’ hiatuses, Sean did a film. this year he’d wanted to try something different than he’d ever done before. Maybe two years of being a Prairie Patriarch was dulling him. Maybe he just wanted to be nasty. Audiences, after all, loved a bad villain almost as much as the Good Guy. And Sean wanted to be bad. He wanted to revel in this role.

Sean had read various scripts and had settled on this adventure story set in Madagascar. He wouldn’t be the star, but accepting third billing had never bothered him as it did some actors. Some actors could accept nothing less after they’d been on top. But as long as Sean was working on a role he wanted to do, he really didn’t mind. Sean secretly wondered if he wasn’t a workaholic. Anyway, he was keeping himself from being typecast. That was another thing he’d learned from his father who’d always enjoyed a varied career and worked steadily up until the minute he’d died. Virtually. The Old Man had been filming a dog food commercial when he had literally taken a nosedive into the kibble and set off a canine chorus of barks and howling that had disrupted the studio for hours. The place
had to be hosed out by firemen, and twelve dog psychiatrists had to be consulted before the high
priced pooches could be soothed. Sean’s father was found with a grin on his face, as if he had
witnessed the chaos his passing had created.

Sean sighed again. Yes, he’d picked this role, but he thought the film would be shot in Spain, not in
Madagascar. Maybe location had been selected to accommodate the company. Except for the main
stars, the major technicians, and the director, most of the cast were blacks and mixed bloods imported
from Africa. Sean had worked with plenty of American blacks, but had never known anyone
actually from Africa, black, white, or any shade in between.

The taxi wove through the narrow streets. The driver had said that on market day the streets were
crowded. Well, it must’ve been market day because the streets were swarming with people.

Tananarive was a modern city, the capital of the Malagasy Republic, located near the center of
Madagascar. It contained a university and the international airport where Sean had just landed. Most
of the people looked alike to him, but he knew they were of either African Negro or Indonesian
descent. Also, there were several thousand Frenchmen living in Tananarive. The island had been a
French colony from 1896 to 1960, so there were many people of mixed blood in its citizenry.

Although he was black, Sean’s taxi driver had to have French blood in his veins somewhere. The
man drove as wildly as any Frenchman in Paris. Sean imagined the man hated market day when the
crowds forced him to slow up. The guy must be a terror in the countryside.

Sean thought about the film about to be shot and decided that the movie’s story line was about as
foreign as its setting. Sean played a former seaman turned pirate. He was in a lot of the action scenes
and that appealed to his sense of adventure. Trouble was, when Sean thought of pirates,, the West
Indies and the Barbary Coast in northern Africa, not Madagascar, came to mind. But he had recently
learned that in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth centuries, sea marauders had made this island one of
their centers of operation. Captain Kidd had even roamed these waters. Pirates were a free wheeling
lot, owing allegiance to no country. But occasionally they set up their own colonies where they lived
by their own code. One of these colonies was located on Madagascar and was named Libertalia.
Although it lasted only a short time in the late Seventeenth Century, its name survived in legend.

Now Libertalia was to be the name of Sean’s new movie. Although it would be filmed in
Madagascar and concerned pirates, it had little to do with the glory days of piracy. Set later, in the
Nineteenth Century, it depicted a scruffy crew of vagabonds who roamed the east coast of Africa,
raided coastal cities, and hid out in Madagascar. The pirates were despicable and treated the natives
miserably.

Sean was to play Jacob Fletcher, one of the rottenest of the pirates. Sean loved the snarling, bitter,
blood-and-guts character. Fletcher was so mean, Sean could wallow in Fletcher’s ugliness. He could
be a dirty dog, ruthless to helpless people and whining to his superiors. And the best part was that he
got to violate a sweet island girl and then ‘kill’ her. This role could become one of his major coups. If
he wanted a change from what he’d been doing, this role should be about as far removed from a
good hearted, understanding rancher as he would ever want to get.

The main story of LIBERTALIA revolved around a British sea captain who cleaned up one band of
the marauding pirates and saved a mainland plantation for the father of the heroine. Jacob Fletcher
and the island girl he would ‘murder’ were part of a minor subplot, but Sean aimed to make it as vital
in the picture as possible.

Sean wonder about his co-star, the sweet island girl he would ‘kill.’ Melana Clerke-Jones was an
unknown actress, one of the mixed bloods from Africa. Sean heard she’d been hired for her sensuous
dancing techniques. Someone who’d met her said she was also a stunning beauty.
Beauty or not, Sean was concerned with her acting. He’d been surrounded by beautiful women all his life. Most of them were shallow and interested in the best camera angle for themselves. He was told Melana was cultured, sophisticated, and educated. In other words, she was almost everything he wasn’t. But none of that was important. All he asked was that she was personable, got along well with him, and could contribute to a polished scene. Otherwise, she’d make him look bad on camera. They had several scenes together. The acting ability of his co-star was the only thing that had him worried about concerning this project. That, and the location!

Melana Clerke-Jones was indeed lovely. Her dark hair was pulled back revealing a perfectly oval frame for her strong face. Although she was feminine, there was nothing dainty about her. As he studied her upon their first meeting, Sean sensed the inner core of toughness to her character and realized she probably had defied all sorts of people to work on this picture.

Gauzy materials enveloped her shapely body, and Sean thought she looked East Indian as she primly shook hands with him. Probably had East Indian blood in her, among others, Sean thought as he tried to classify her looks. Her manner was neither European nor Eastern. Perhaps she was simply African, he finally decided.

Melana looked him straight in the eye and mumbled a greeting. Sean mumbled back. Her hand felt cool in his. She demurely lowered her eyes, and Sean swore that she curtsied. But he had the feeling she could stand her ground in any fight. She seemed docile and pliant, but he sensed an unapproachable shell that protected her true self. And she wasn’t about to lower her defenses easily. Sean walked away, confused.

Sean was right about Melana Clerke-Jones. She had fought hard to be where she was, but for reasons Sean couldn’t have guessed. Melana was in her early twenties, in her time of youthful idealism, and she was rebelling against her parents’ way of life. For most people, this rebellion came in the late teen years and a certain amount of settling had developed by the time they were Melana’s age.

But Melana sprang from a rebellious family herself. Her father taught at the university at Cape Town, South Africa, while his family thought he should hold a similar position in his native Cornwall, England. Melana’s mother, of extremely mixed blood, had always felt on the outskirts of society. Marriage to a professor had given her the feeling that she was thumbing her nose at people. She cultivated a chip on her shoulder that wasn’t always necessary. Some people just didn’t care or mind about her racial background.

But Blanca, Melana’s mother, wore her defiance proudly and taught her children to be defiant, too. Her older daughter Deetja was a lesbian and an anthropologist. Her younger daughter Melana refused to complete her business administration degree and concentrated her studies on native African dances. In a seemingly desperate search through her cluttered ancestry, Melana had chosen her most controversial line to emphasize. Blanca could understand, but not condone, Melana’s actions. A business career would be far more lucrative. There was no future in dancing. Eventually, Melana would discover that fact for herself. Blanca wasn’t worried. Let the child dream her rebellious dreams. The world of business would always be waiting.

And then the almost unbelievable offer came for Melana to dance in the movie LIBERTALIA. She flew to Madagascar nearly without aid of an airplane, but vowed to keep her poise around the American film crew. Americans were so shallow and without any real dedication or culture. Perhaps they would humor her. They certainly wouldn’t impress her, not even the world-famous stars.
For the next few weeks, Sean enjoyed filming action scenes off the Madagascar coast. Feeling the pitch and roll of the wooden ship under his feet and savoring the tang of salt air in his lungs made him wonder if he’d been a sailor in a former life. Sean smirked. That theory depended upon belief in reincarnation, and he didn’t know if he was quite ready to embrace that. After all, he’d lived the first twelve years of his life on the East Coast of America and the rest on the West Coast. He was simply at home near the ocean and that had nothing to do with reincarnation.

These waters weren’t the Indian Ocean, although that name would be more romantic in a story. No, the east coast of Madagascar was washed by the Indian Ocean, but was far too stormy and strewn with reefs to be safe for ships or filming a movie. The Pangalanes Canal ran along the coast for several hundred miles between Foupointe and Farafangana and made shipping possible for eastern cities, but wasn’t picturesque. No, the movie was being shot on the western coast of the island along the Mozambique Channel that separated Madagascar from the mainland. It was from these waters that the pirates had struck what was now present-day Mozambique, Tanganyika, and South Africa. Melana Clerke-Jones was from South Africa. Sean wondered if any of her ancestors had been marauding pirates.

Back in Tananarive during squally weather, Sean was pleased with the footage they’d filmed on shipboard. But nagging doubts about his co-star came thundering sharply back into his consciousness. She’d never acted in a movie before. From what he could learn, this job was little more than a lark to her. He’d been able to forget his qualms out on the ship. But here he was back in Tananarive, facing his uneasiness squarely again. He shouldn’t be so concerned about the island sequence, but he was.

Watching the rushes of Melana’s dance scenes, Sean realized she could generate sex appeal. She combined an untouchable sophistication with a blatant earthiness. The blend arrested any wandering attention and aroused animal instincts in any male watching. Sean was hypnotized, but practical matters returned when the clip ended.

“That dance is a helluva show stopper, but it lasts only a few minutes. Can she act?” he asked Marty Shroh, the director. Sean had never worked with him before this film. Now Sean wondered how much he was gambling with his whim to take such a radial break from FLANAGAN’S CLAN. At least there was security with his series. He didn’t want this movie to break his career. Stroh was young and obviously had little experience with directing. At least he gave that impression. Damn it, did Stroh have to do his learning on Sean’s movie?

Stroh pushed back his horn-rimmed glasses. “Who cares? She’ll have every man in the audience panting.”

“I care, damn it. I’ll be a laughing stock if my character rapes and kills a rag doll. The girl has to show some reaction to my aggression.”

“Don’t worry about it, Sean. We’ll work something out. Why don’t you get to be friends with Melana? That might make you both more comfortable with your scenes together. It’ll take tense, compact acting. I can see why you’re nervous about it. The scenes won’t make or break the movie, but the right treatment could add a lot to the overall appeal of the movie. Sex sells, Sean.”

“How well I know,” Sean agreed with a sigh.

At the first opportunity, Sean sought Melana out and sat with her during their lunch break on the set. Talk between them was stilted and uninspired.
“What is this stuff we’re eating?” Sean complained. “Embalmed beef?”

“It is beef, yes,’ Melana answered in her precise speech pattern with its hint of English boarding school accent. “It has been prepared according to an Indonesian recipe. You are perhaps unaccustomed to the spices in the sauce.”

“Perhaps,” he mocked and fought to keep himself from extending a prissy pinkie finger.

Melana either didn’t realize his flippancy or chose to ignore it. “I suppose my people would have trouble eating the cardboard food that you Americans consume in California.”

His mockery hadn’t escaped her, and that pissed him off that she had detected his barb. “Now, you’ve read that in a magazine somewhere,” he countered and knew that he sounded challenging and put off, all at once.

She raised a bushy eyebrow slightly. “Perhaps.”

Was she mocking him now? That tiny glint in her eyes said she was. Making friends with her was supposed to make working with her easier. But neither one of them seemed to be working at becoming friendly. How could Sean relax when Madagascar was so foreign to him and becoming more so every day? Wouldn’t anything ever seem normal again?

“You don’t mind this place, do you?” Sean asked in exasperation. Maybe he could appeal to her humanity. She might even take pity on this poor foreigner.

“Should I?” she snapped, signaling the end of her short term humanitarian career.

Ah, come on, lady! Don’t act like you’re wearing iron pantyhose. I’m trying here, for Pete’s sake. I’m miserable, though, and I’m starting to care if that misery shows.

He decided to try again to appeal to her sympathy. “You’re from South Africa. That’s practically next door. My home’s on the other side of the Equator and in a different hemisphere. My kids back in California are probably asleep, and my body tells me that’s what I should be doing, too, right now. I still want to be alert in the middle of the night over here.”

“That will pass soon,” she said, seeming to bend a little. “Then, when you return to your home ’on the other side of the Equator and in a different hemisphere,’ you’ll have trouble readjusting to California.”

Wrong. She had bent, at all. “You just like to spread little rays of sunshine wherever you can, don’t you?” he spat at her from between clenched teeth.

“Now you’re back to being sarcastic again, aren’t you?”

Now the gloves were off. “Well, maybe that’s the way I’m feeling, lady!”

“But I don’t have to be the recipient of your rotten mood!” She swung around to rise from the wooden table.

Sean’s big paw grabbed her arm. “Wait!”

Melana inhaled sharply and stared at his grasping hand.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to maul you.” Sean released his hold. “Be a sport. Hear me out a minute, will you?”
Melana settled back into her chair and waited.

“I’m trying to make it possible for us to be friends. Don’t you want to be friendly?” he pleaded.

Her eyes flashed fire, but her voice was chilled in ice. “It depends on why you want to be friendly, Mr. Murphy.”

Lord, why couldn’t he say the right thing to this woman? “So we can put a good film together,” he nearly sobbed. “That’s why we’re here. Or had you forgotten?”

“There are many levels of consciousness, Mr. Murphy.”

Sean had had about enough of Eastern philosophical crap and talking in mystical platitudes. “Don’t be devious. That’s so tiresome in a woman.”

“And you think your blunt American ways are glamorous to us?! At least our men are suave.”

He frowned at her. “That’s the way you like a man to be?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“No, I’d honestly like to know. Do you Eastern women like men who pussyfoot around with limp wrists? Guys that are concerned with the grouse season and the yearly regatta?”

“I believe you have successfully insulted both sexes in my culture, Mr. Murphy,” she replied with disdain.

“With one question?!”

“That question was flippant and uncouth. You are being rude and a boor. That’s bad manners for anyone.” She made a motion to push her chair back.

“Wait. Don’t leave. I didn’t mean to be crude. Or nosy about some other person's way of life. I’m sorry.”

Melana settled once again into her chair and eyed him levelly.

“Look,” Sean said. “We got off to a bad start. But we got a job to do here, and I think our success depends on each other. How about it if we practice our lines together? All right?”

Melana agreed rather reluctantly.

Melana and the middle-aged actor were thrown together a lot because they had several scenes to shoot. Melana was impressed with being cast opposite Sean Murphy, a seasoned actor who’d appeared in many films. She learned many acting skills from watching Murphy. He was a professional and tried to be patient in helping her.

But Melana was not impressed with the man himself. He was handsome, but moody; gentlemanly, but distant. Sometimes she smelled liquor on his breath. Someone told her he had personal problems, but she didn’t like gossip so didn’t ask for details.

Madagascar was nearly home to Melana, but the American crew considered it a hellhole. They broke when they could for ‘civilization.’ One week in a hellish rain, Murphy and several stuntmen flew to Kenya and hunted large game in the sunshine. Another time, Murphy rounded up an odd assortment
of company people and flew them to Cairo to see the Pyramids. The assistant director, a boon operator, a script girl, more extras than could be counted easily, the thirteen-year-old son of the leading lady, and Melana all stepped onto the double-engine plane not realizing Sean Murphy had ‘borrowed’ it illegally from the mayor of Tananarive. The escapade nearly got them kicked out of the country, but Sean charmed the locals into forgetting the episode. Before he finished, he had everyone laughing.

And the mad escapade became the turning point in his relationship with Melana.

That morning had been dull and routine when a drenching rain had cancelled filming for the day. Melana was plodding doggedly out of the studio to spend the day reading a book she wasn’t particularly interested in when a passing script girl grabbed her arm.

“Come on, if you want to do something exciting!”

“Where are we going?”

“I don’t know! But it’s bound to be more exciting than this place!”

Melana found herself shoved into a car, driven madly across town, and then propelled into an airplane. She recognized people on the production crew and quizzed them.

“Where are we going?” she demanded of the assistant director who had a flashing gleam in his eyes as they stood in the aisle of the plane. The compartment was filled with laughing, carefree people. This adventure, although mysterious, looked like fun.

“Beats me! Go ask Sean.”

“Sean?”

“You know. Murphy. He’s up in the cabin.”

“Why is he up there?”

“Because he’s the pilot.”

“Good Lord,” she muttered under her breath as she fought herself forward through the milling bodies. She poked her head inside the cabin. “Murphy! What do you think you are doing?!”

His eyes flashed with joy as he shot her a look over his shoulder. “Melana! Good to have you aboard. Come on up here and sit with me!”

“Will it be alright?”

“Hell, I don’t know! But I’m the pilot, so I say to come ahead!”

His infectious glee was catching. A charge of juvenile playfulness shot through her. An adventure! She had not gone on a spontaneous adventure in years! What fun!

She pushed her way into the tiny compartment and sat in the seat he indicated. “What is going on?”

“We’re flying to Cairo. You can be my co-pilot.”

She sprang out of the seat as if it were hot-wired. “I can’t do that! I know nothing about flying.”

He waved her down. “Sit down. Sit down. I’ll take care of the flying. You just sit there and keep me
She settled uneasily into her seat. This flight was insanity, but it sure beat that dull book back at her apartment. Maybe a little adventure was just what she was needing. “What duties do a co-pilot have to perform?”

Sean was fiddling with the instrument panel and replied absently. “Oh, pass me the coffee cup when I ask for it. Watch for the Nile River and tell me when you see it.” He flashed her a smile. “And don’t let me fly into the side of a pyramid.”

His enjoyment was contagious, and she was caught up in it.

“Let’s see,” she replied. “The Pyramids. They’re those huge, pointy things out in the desert, aren’t they?”

He forgot his instruments for a moment, and he grinned up at her. His appreciation of her irreverence shone in his eyes.

She smiled, now that she had his attention. Perhaps this day wouldn’t be wasted, after all. “Aim for the Nile and hit it. Aim for the Pyramids and don’t hit them. Got it.” She lifted one eyebrow. “Is this what is meant by flying by the seat of one’s pants?”

He grinned. “Not quite. But I’ll make a pilot out of you yet.”

“No need to hurry. I just became a co-pilot today.”

“Well, let’s get you a little air time then.” He reached for the microphone. “Everybody back there take a seat and get a belt strapped around you. Cairo, here we come!” He winked at Melana as the big airplane began to roll down the runway.

It was only later that Sean’s guests learned that he’d neglected to ask permission to borrow the airplane from its rightful owner, the Mayor of Tananarive. By then, Sean had shoveled out so much blarney about being good-will ambassadors to Cairo from Tananarive that the ruffled mayor could only shrug and go along with the incident. After all, the movie company was bringing a lot of business to Tanarive. And glamour. Sean Murphy was a big American star.

“You came out of that scrape smelling like a rose,” Melana said as she and Sean walked away from the hangar.

Sean was grinning with satisfaction. “That, my dear co-pilot, was really flying by the seat of my pants. I was making it up as I went. I don’t know where all that blarney came from.”

“From your Irish heart, no doubt.”

He looked at her with suspicion in his eyes.

“I meant that remark kindly, Sean.”

“I know. That’s what makes me suspicious.”

She squeezed his arm. “Oh, Sean, you are a dear!”

And he really was a dear to her. She valued their budding friendship, even if it would be short-lived.

For by this time, Melana had discovered there was more to Sean than the flat, deadpan face he showed the world. As he became more relaxed with a person, he opened up. He and Melana weren’t
exactly friends yet; but since the Cairo fiasco, they could at least laugh together.

“Come on, Melana, we better go over these lines again before tomorrow’s shooting.”

“And the beach is not crowded this afternoon, Sean. Some people don’t like walking in the rain.”

Sean wiped rain off his face. “Some people might have a little sense.”

“Oh, come on, Sean! Don’t be an old fuddy-duddy!”

“Hey, who almost got arrested for feeding junk food to exotic zoo animals on a special diet?”

“They loved it!”

“But not their handlers. And who flew you on that neat trip to the Pyramids without asking permission to borrow the plane? And who tries jogging with you even if it’s going to kill him?”

“Enough, Sean!” she begged through her gay laughter. “I must concede. The answer to all your questions is Sean Murphy.”

“Call me an old fuddy-duddy,” he mumbled in mock anger.

“Of course, you want an apology,” she said seriously, despite the grin tugging at the corners of her mouth.

“Nothing less,” he agreed aloofly with his pseudo-ruffled feathers all fluffed out.

“Then you shall have it. But it shall be about something else, something I’m truly sorry I did.”

He looked puzzled.

“Once you apologized for being rude. I should’ve taken my turn. I didn’t mean to seem so stuck-up. And you must forgive me for something else. I’ve been a little star-struck being around you.”

“Of me?”

“And I didn’t want you to know.”

His broad grin said he was clearly flattered. “Of plain, little ol’ down home me?”

She took a playful swat at his arm. “You are famous, you know.”

He sobered. “Let’s forget about that. What’s important to me is that I’ve finally adjusted to Madagascar, and you’re part of the reason I have.”

“You embarrass me, Sean.”

“But it’s the truth. You’ve taught me to be tolerant. This place seemed like the dark side of the moon when I first got here. But now I know if I meet it halfway, it isn’t so bad after all.”

“And you have taught me so many things about acting. I’ll always be grateful.”

“So let’s get back to it, shall we?” he demanded, as he rattled his script at her.

“Slave driver!” But she was smiling.
The clouds finally cleared, and the climate around Tananarive changed from moist and humid to hot and humid. Very hot and humid. Generally warm, the temperature was shoved upwards by heat from the desert country in the southern end of the island. Tananarive was part of the central highlands where temperatures stayed cool, but not during a heat wave.

Sean reread the letters from his daughter Molly. She was getting to be quite a young lady. In a couple of years, she’d be dating. It’d be hard to let that one go. But as much as he doted on Molly, he could see traces of Midge, Molly’s mother, in her. Midge had a hard-bitten, bitter edge to her. There’d been a time when he’d loved her, though. For part of Midge also reminded him of his own mother, now long departed. That had been Midge’s saving grace. Perhaps he’d expected her to be exactly like Mary Ellen Murphy. If he had, he was sorry. He felt apologetic to that long ago girl he’d fallen in love with. But Midge had changed and he had changed, and nothing was ever the same. And so they had parted their lives.

Would he ever marry again? In the lonely nights, he yearned for someone beside him. At the end of a trying or rewarding day, he longed for someone to talk to. His finger felt naked without a wedding ring on it.

Sean was restless. He pushed out of his chair. He had to get away from this heat. Where did he hear the crew went for the weekend? Oh, yes, Majunga, the seaport on the upper west end of the island. It was nearly three hundred miles away by car, but he knew someone who would lend him a plane.

Majunga was definitely cooler. And, although it was less than one-fourth the size of Tananarive, it was still a nice sized city.

Sean rented a room near the beach. Tomorrow he might hunt up the crew of LIBERTALIA. Tonight, he would merely sit on the veranda and enjoy the breeze coming in off the ocean.

That’s fine and dandy, his conscience interrupted. You worked all day to keep from thinking of Melana, and here you are in the same city where she’s gone off to spend a weekend with her friends.

“Oh, boy,” Sean muttered with a sigh at his conscience. “Shut up, will you? I know I miss her.” And by finally saying it aloud, he realized how much he meant it. He missed that plaguing, engaging, mixed-blood girl a lot.

The next day, Sunday, Melana was sitting on the beach with several of her young friends when she looked up to see Sean Murphy approaching them.

“Oh, boy,” Sean muttered with a sigh at his conscience. “Shut up, will you? I know I miss her.” And by finally saying it aloud, he realized how much he meant it. He missed that plaguing, engaging, mixed-blood girl a lot.

The next day, Sunday, Melana was sitting on the beach with several of her young friends when she looked up to see Sean Murphy approaching them.

“Sean! How nice to see you! I didn’t know you’d be here in Majunga. Are you going bathing?”

“Just tromping the beach, seeing what’s going on. I wanted to see the Indian Ocean, so I came up here.”

Melana suppressed a smile. “You still haven’t seen it. This is the Mozambique Channel. You’ll have to go to Tamatave on the east coast to see the ocean.”

“I couldn’t go home and not see it, could I?”

She felt a pang of disappointment. “You’re leaving soon?”
“In a few days, I have to kill you first.” He grinned at her alarm. “In the movie, remember?”

“Oh. Sure,” she said in relief. “How foolish of me.”

“Listen, are you doing anything special with these folks?”

“Just bathing. Later we’ll eat a beach supper. Why?”

“Well, I thought if you wanted, we could walk around and talk some. I’m missing my family and I guess I’d just like to be with someone who understands that. It’s not a very tempting offer, I know. But I sure would appreciate the company.”

“Sure. That’s okay.” She felt slightly flustered. Except for rehearsing lines, Sean had never spent more than two minutes of his attention on her. And even though there was the beginning of friendship between them, she had no idea why he had sought out her companionship now. He must really be lonely. Sure, that was it. As he had just said, he was missing his family. The pain was probably suddenly sharper because it seemed he might soon be with them.

Melana grabbed the naked arm of a passing friend. “Listen, Philip, I’m going for a walk with Mr. Murphy.”

Philip’s teeth flashed in his dark face. “Be back in time for supper, Melana!”

“I will.” She silently thanked Philip for giving her an excuse for getting away from Murphy, if she wanted or needed it. She wasn’t entirely comfortable being alone with the moody man.

She threw her hooded caftan over her head and slipped on her sandals. The rising wind rustled the caftan around her long legs and molded to her hips. The brim of Murphy’s straw hat flapped in the rising wind. He wore khaki slacks and a gaudy, short-sleeved shirt like the ones worn in Hawaii, thousands of miles away.

“Hope this doesn’t brew up a storm.” Weather was always a neutral topic, Melana thought as they walked along.

“Tell me about yourself, Melana. Do you have family?”

“Yes, my parents live in Capetown, South Africa. My father is a professor of English literature at the university. Mother is a receptionist in a medical doctor’s office. They belong to the County Club and play bridge with two couples’ groups.”

“Very proper. Any brothers or sisters?”

“My older sister Deetja is very dedicated. She is working on her Doctorate in African Anthropology. It is very interesting work, she says.” She glanced at him. “This is where mankind started, you know. Here, near Madagascar.”

“No, I didn’t. I thought that happened up in the Middle East around the Fertile Crescent.”

“New evidence is pointing to origins in the Great Rift Valley.”

“That’s up in Ethiopia, isn’t it?”

“A lot of it, yes. Someday Africa will split along the Rift. That’s what happened to Madagascar. At one time it was part of the African Continent until it split off.”

“Really? I’m really getting educated here.”
“I’m sorry, Sean. I didn’t mean to lecture.”

“Who’s complaining? I’m not. When I first came here, it was just an uncivilized spot where we had to do location work. It was a jungle without the trees. I felt like I was on the dark side of the moon. It’s about as different from Southern California as you can get. But I’ve done some exploring around, and the place is start to grow on me.”

“I’m glad. There is a certain beauty about a land that can’t be tamed.”

“Like certain people?”

“I don’t understand—”

“You. You are a most interesting mix. College educated, but working as a primitive dancer.”

“I am not college educated. I attended for two years and dropped out. The general courses interested me, but I couldn’t decide on a major. I wanted to continue to dip here and there in the curriculum, but I knew it was unfair to my parents to continue paying for my caprices. So I took a secretarial job, but continue to study through reading. Maybe someday I will return to finish a degree.”

“But the exotic dancing—”

Her wistful smile was full of irony. “Part of my heritage, Sean. Surely you know that I am part black?”

“No. You got a problem with that? Are you crusading with some cross to bear? Beating your bloody breast for your cause?” he asked, almost bitterly. “If that’s your problem, don’t share with me,” he said with disgust.

“So, you are not prejudice."

“I try not to be,“ he mumbled.

“Forgive me. I suppose I am guilty of prejudice myself."

“How do you figure that?“ he grumbled, but was warming again to her.

“I assumed that since you were white, you felt superior to people of my heritage."

“Pshaw! You ought to get a load of what’s in my blood! Yeah, it’s mostly Irish, but I have a feeling that a lot of colleens on my family tree fell for a line from some vagabonds headed through town."

She smiled. “I believe that some of my ancestors may have been easily swayed, also.“ She considered him before she spoke again. “I have heard that there is much prejudice in your country against black people.”

“I’ve heard there is in your country, too. Look, Melana, I don’t care where you go around this world, you’re going to find people hating other people for the stupidest reasons you can imagine. Skin color? What the hell does that mean, anyway? The only thing that really counts is how you feel about someone in your heart.”

She studied him for a moment. “Somehow, I didn’t quite have you figured for a liberal optimist and a romantic poet.”
“Let me tell you, I’ve known some of the loveliest people in the world to have the ugliest of hearts.”

“Someone like your wife?” She saw him frown. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have been so personal.”

“That’s okay. It’s public knowledge.” He glanced at her. “This color thing really bothers you?”

“It is the hatred. Before someone gets to know me, I’m judged by the darkness of my skin.”

“Before someone gets to know your heart?”

“Exactly!”

“See? I’m not such a poet. We were saying the same thing about the same problem.”

She studied the sand she was plowing up with her feet. “It’s just not the whites. The blacks can hate me, too.”

“You have an English name, though.”

“Clerke-Jones? Father is English, but his people picked up a few exotic traces, too. A great-grandfather was stationed in India and married a lovely native girl. Their son, my grandfather, was working in Gibraltar when he met and married a French national on vacation. My parents met at Oxford University and married against the wishes of both sides. Each side thought the other family had inferior blood.”

“Sounds like an interesting mix so far.”

“Mother has the Negro blood, of course. Her sheltered great-grandmother was compromised by a handsome, well-educated man who, unfortunately, was black. Her family was distantly related to Jan Smuts and considered socially prominent. A liaison with a Negro could not be tolerated, but my great-grandmother became obviously pregnant. Her black lover was never seen again, but his spawn grew and prospered. The young mother became a recluse and never married. Her child, my half-caste grandmother, became her life. By all accounts, my grandmother was much sought after because of her great beauty, but nobody wanted to marry her. Then a fire and brimstone missionary boiled onto the scene, declaring there wasn’t a Christian in the lot, and hustled her off to the altar. He said nobody treated even a dog like that back in Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love.”

“Your grandfather was an American?”

She smiled. “Yes, and a flamboyant old goat he was, too. He was preaching hellfire and damnation the day he died in the pulpit, but he was very gentle with his grandchildren. I loved him very much.”

“Sounds like he wore a white hat.”

“What?”

“You know, he was one of the good guys.”

“Oh, like in your American Westerns.”

“That’s right.”

“You’ve played some of those good guys, too, haven’t you?”

“Everything from pony soldiers to wranglers. And, eh, maybe you didn’t notice, but there were times I wore a black hat.”
“Oh, you mean you were a villain.”

“A few times I was a downright, ornery snake-in-the grass! ‘Course, I’ve been in comedies, too, and love stories. I’ve even wound up with the girl once or twice.”

“You’re an all-around actor, then.”

“Nah. I’m not stupid enough to believe that. I’ve done some good stuff, but I’ll never be good enough for the heavy, dramatic roles. I’m good at what I do, and I’m smart enough to know my limitations. I live with no illusions. Its been said I go after the easy money. So what if I do? I’m steady and reliable and still in the business. I’m a survivor. I’ve stayed afloat when a lot of other Joes have found themselves back pumping gas in Iowa, or wherever else they’re from. ‘Course, I had an advantage they didn’t. My dad had been in the business. He gave me a lot of pointers.”

“William Murphy? I’ve seen him in old films.”

“He could really turn in a quality performance. He’s been called one of the greatest character actors in the business. He learned a lot of that in vaudeville and on the New York stage. I was born out East and went to school there. I remember Dad on Broadway. We had a great life in Connecticut, just my folks and me. Then he got called to Hollywood, and nothing was ever really the same. My mother died the first year we were in California, and I think that’s where a lot of Dad’s loneliness came from that can be seen in his movies. I’m so glad, though, for those films. Whenever I get lonely for him, I just watch one of his shows. It doesn’t bring him back, but it helps.”

“He was Irish?”

“That’s right. And Mother was English, with a lot of Scottish and a little German mixed in.”

“Your blood is very pure, then.”

“But no better than yours, if that’s what you’re getting at. You’ve got to stop being so sensitive about your ancestry. It makes no difference to me. I’m the one who looks into hearts, remember?”

“Sorry. It’s refreshing to talk to someone like you.”

“Someday it will change.”

“Prejudice hasn’t changed in three thousand years. As far as we know, it could have stretched back further than that.”

“It’s getting better, Melana. Really it is.”

“Maybe in America. You are lucky to live there.”

“Aw, it’s a mess there, too. And I don’t know if it’ll ever be perfect. We solve one problem and another one pops up.”

“At least you’re not bored.”

His quick grin could be electric. “Never bored. Well, here we are, back with your friends.”

“Would you have supper with us, Sean?”

“Nah. Thanks, anyway.” He walked away without a backwards glance.

‘Strange man,’ Melana thought as she walked toward her waving friends.
Early the next morning brought the promised rain, but it was more like hot water being whipped around by the wind in Tananarive. Humidity was extremely high. There was no refreshing relief that rain generally brings.

The director was ecstatic. He’d been waiting for just such a day.

“We’ll film the rape scene.”

Cameras were set up in the outdoor hut set. Everyone was miserable and sweating in five minutes.

“But we haven’t rehearsed!” Melana complained.

“Just fight him off and squeal a lot,” the director said. “You’re getting raped, not pleading for sainthood.”

‘I feel so unready for this,” Melana said as she tried to concentrate on her script.

“What if you’d known it was coming up?” Sean mumbled. “You wouldn’t have slept a wink. Relax. You’ll do okay.”

“Good, good,” the director said enthusiastically when the scene was finally set up. “Sean. Melana. I want to see you sweating. I want to see you groveling in the dirt.”

The cameras started rolling. Melana was seated on her knees in the hut braiding a basket. The storm could be heard lashing the sides of the hut. Melana looked serene, almost Madonna-like.

She looked up and saw Sean in the doorway, looking down at her with hard, smoldering eyes. Melana understood that look. She gasped, shot to her feet, and tried to avoid his hands. But lust had made him faster.

“You little vixen. I’ll show you who’s boss.”

Sean’s voice was hard and unfriendly. His grabbing hands hurt her arms. Melana was frightened. This wasn’t acting. This was for real.

They fell wordlessly to the floor and grappled in the dust. Melana squealed and pounded Sean’s chest, but Sean was muscular and Melana’s struggles were in vain.

She felt his lips on her throat and screamed. Her legs pummeled his, but he was wedged tightly against her body. She felt grimy from the dust and sweaty from the humidity and disgust for the man pawing her.

His hand raked up her thigh, pulling her skirt upward. His palm was rough and abrasive. She opened her mouth to scream again, and he dropped his over hers.

She beat on his back as hard as she could. Nothing could break the savage grip Sean’s mouth had on her lips as he ground his body harder against hers.

“Cut! For Christ’s sake, cut! Melana, you’re beating the hell out of Sean’s back! You’ll hurt him!”

“Hurt him?! Hurt him?! Why should I worry if I hurt him?!” Melana tried to push Sean away.
Sean fell aside. Melana covered her mouth with the back of one shaking hand and dug her elbows in the dirt as she tried to push further away from Sean. Her eyes were filled with horror as she stared at the man resting on one elbow and solemnly studying her.

“Hey! Do that again, Melana. We might be able to use it.”

“Leave her alone, Marty,” Sean mumbled. “She’s had enough for awhile.” He looked at the frightened girl. “You gonna be okay, honey? I didn’t mean to be so hard on you. You need to go rest. Here, let me—” He reached out a hand, but she shrunk away in disgust.

Sean sighed. “Okay, maybe I’m not your favorite person right at the moment. But we got some great footage. That’s what being an actress is all about.” He draped a robe over her shoulders. “Go get cleaned up. Then rest awhile. Go on.”

Melana stumbled clumsily to her feet. Sean offered her no help, but watched with doleful eyes. He seemed to understand that she didn’t want him to touch her. Just as he understood about the robe. She was beginning to shiver violently. And neither the humidity nor the heat was going to warm her.

She wove toward her dressing area, head down, on unsteady feet. She felt so used, so cheap, so violated! That dear, sweet man who was almost her friend had meant to rape her! It made no difference if cameras were rolling or people were watching. Sean Murphy had been in the process of attacking her. She had felt the animal lust in his arms and in his kiss. A woman knew.

Melana let the hot water from the shower rush over her battered body. The trembling gradually eased, but would she never feel clean again?

When she awoke from her nap, she could think clearer. Sean had been acting. She realized that now. And yet she knew when she saw him again, she would involuntarily shrink away from him.

The next morning Melana found a bouquet of pansies on her dressing table. The card read: Forgive me? She had to smile. Apparently he didn’t know the language of the flowers. Pansies were for thoughts, not forgiveness. For thoughts? Maybe he wasn’t so wrong after all, because now she was thinking of him. What a dear, sweet man he was.

Sean was cautious around her on the set until he could see he’d been forgiven. She was shooting crowd scenes and he was doing lines with men, so they weren’t thrown together much. Once he caught her with a pensive look on her face. She smiled at him and he looked much relieved, but he came no closer.

Melana had been casually dating a Madagascar boy who worked as an extra on the film. Abdul was darker than Melana, having much more black blood than she did and also a large amount of Indonesian stock. He was very handsome and dashing and also very jealous.

“You must not be friends with the American actor, Sean Murphy!” Abdul ordered one afternoon as they talked behind the movie lot. “He is not of our world.”

Melana pulled her arm out of his grasp. “You cannot tell me who I can have for friends, Abdul. Besides, you have nothing to worry about. Sean Murphy and the other Americans will soon be gone.”

“Not soon enough for me! And you will do as I say!”
“I will not! Maybe women in your family must pretend to be dogs, but I never will. I am my own person. Perhaps we should not see each other again. You are not as handsome as I thought. Your heart is ugly.”

He grabbed her arm and she yelled in pain. “I will teach you--” But someone yanked him violently aside.

“Don’t try anymore of the rough stuff, buddy,” Sean Murphy ordered. “The little lady isn’t interested.”

“I will get you for this outrage, Murphy--”

“No, you won’t, Abdul,” Marty Stroh, the director said. “You’re off this picture. Go to the front office and collect your wages. Then get lost.”

Abdul’s eyes were flashing as he looked at the three hard faces. “Oh, hell, she isn’t worth it.”

Marty stopped Sean from hitting Abdul. “Get lost, Abdul,” Marty warned. "Or I’ll turn him loose.”

Sean outweighed Abdul by forty pounds and it was all in Sean’s barrel chest and massive shoulders. Abdul growled to himself and turned away.

Sean turned to Melana. “You okay?”

But the whole scene had been like a farce, a melodrama, to Melana. What fools men could make of themselves!

“And once again the cowboy wearing the white hat thunders across the prairie to rescue the fair maiden! Oh, Sean, how silly it all was!”

“Hey, wait a minute. I thought you were needing help. I didn’t mean to break you and your boyfriend up from your fun.”

“He isn’t my boyfriend. I’ve just dated him a few times. It’s nothing serious.”

“And you wouldn’t have minded if he slapped you around a little? I understand some girls like that sort of thing.”

“No, Sean, I don’t. I’m just saying I could have handled him. I didn’t need a hero to come riding out of the sunset to champion my cause.”

His eyes snapped. “Sorry. Sorry I interfered.”

“Sean--”

But he didn’t listen and stomped away with all feathers ruffled.

“Oh, dear, I’ve hurt his feelings.”

“You’ve done more than that, sister,” Marty confided. “He doesn’t know if he’s coming or going, as far as you’re concerned. And the poor slob probably doesn’t even know why.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You probably don’t. But let me give you a friendly piece of advice. The next time a man wants to help, let him. It’ll make him feel like a hero, and it just might save your hide. Nursing bruises and
broken bones is no fun. And it wouldn’t do that pretty face of yours any good to get all busted up, either. Now get back on the set. We have work to do.”

Sean kept his distance, but the pensive look was replaced with puzzled anger. Even across the room, Melana could feel his self-righteous fury. Oh, dear, she didn’t wish either one of them to waste so much energy on something that was merely a misunderstanding. And whatever was Marty hinting at? Her part of the movie was nearly finished, and suddenly that sounded very good. She wanted to get on with her life back in Cape Town. Maybe now she could even finish her degree. Her plans sounded tempting and fresh. She wanted to be shed of this move forever.

And she didn’t want to hear anything more about Abdul or about Sean Murphy.

But she and Sean did have one more scene to shoot together. In many ways it was the most important one. For this was when Fletcher strangled the native dancing girl.

Melana tried to talk to Sean on the set, but he brushed past her.

“Sean. Sean, please. Wait.”

Sean looked back at her. “You blow hot and cold, baby. Don’t confuse me anymore.”

“I’m sorry I hurt your feelings, Sean. Don’t let’s fight. Please?”

Sean frowned in thought, then pointed at her. “Tell you what we will do. We’ll finish this damned movie and get out of each others’ hair. All right?”

Melana felt her back stiffen. “Sounds like a fine idea to me.” She stomped away, but felt her anger dissolve with each step. Damned! She hadn’t intended to fight with him again.

Maybe they were just nervous about the approaching murder scene.

The morning of the scene filming, Melana’s friend Philip came to see her on the set.

“You look troubled, Melana. I haven’t seen you since the beach supper. I’ve been on business in Cape Town. I saw your parents and they send their greetings.”

“Thank you, Philip. That was very kind to deliver their message.”

“Anything for an old friend. How’s Abdul?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t seen him. We’ve broken up.”

“Poor Melana! That’s why you look so troubled. Listen, I just stopped by for a moment. I know you’re busy. We’ll talk later”

“Thank you, Philip. You are a dear.” She reached up and kissed his cheek.

Suddenly they were wrenched violently apart, and someone had a fist drawn back to strike Philip.

“Sean! Don’t! It’s Philip! He’s a friend!”

Sean stopped in mid-lunge. “Sorry,” he mumbled as he helped Philip straighten his clothing. "I thought it was that Abdul guy. You all look alike."

"Sean!"
"Sorry," Sean said to Philip. "I meant no harm."

Philip stared from one to the other and then left.

"Sean, will you stop it!!"

"I--"

She slapped him hard across the face. "Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!"

Cold fury blazed from his eyes. "Gladly," he mumbled and stalked away.

She opened her mouth to call him back, but shut it again when she could think of nothing to say.

Perhaps, if the director had known about their latest fray, he might’ve postponed the murder scene and let tempers cool. But he didn’t, and the filming started.

Once again the native girl was in her hut, but there was no storm raging outside. The drunken sailor Fletcher came crashing through the door and glared at her.

"Where have you been trying to hide, girl?! I told you I want you with me when I say, and I don’t want any sass about it."

She glanced at him in contempt. "Leave me alone, Fletcher. I have another man. Someone who cares about me. Me!"

He grabbed her arm and twisted her around to face him. "No other man can have you, understand?" he snarled. "You’re mine!"

"No! No!" She fought and scratched, kicked and pounded, but she was no match for his strength as he pulled her ever tighter into his arms.

"Mine!" he snarled. "Forever!"

His punishing mouth scoured hers and she whimpered in disgust. Her hands pushed feebly against his chest.

"Forever," he murmured.

And then his kiss softened. She felt his arms loosen their grip to caress her. Her arms trailed along his neck, and she clung to him as their kiss deepened.

"Melana," he whispered against her cheek and the sound brought them both to their senses. They were filming a scene. Had the sensitive microphone picked up her name? And they remembered they were on bad terms with each other and were angry that the kiss might have hinted at other, different feelings.

Sean snapped her head back sharply by the hair. Melana gasped with surprise and pain.

"You hellcat!" Sean snarled, reverting back to the script. "You drive a man crazy! You’re not fit to live!" His hands closed around her throat. "Die!"

Melana struggled as she knew she was supposed to do, but she had been off-balance when Sean grabbed her. He had a deadly grip on her neck and didn’t realize it. That, plus his anger could kill her.
Melana felt herself growing faint as she grabbed his hands. To try to stop him would only succeed in his trying harder to kill her. He would only think she was adding drama to her role. By the time he realized her plight, he might have indeed killed her. The only way she could survive was to ‘die.’

Melana went limp as unconsciousness swept over her. Sean, not knowing any differently, watched her slide into a heap at his feet. The cameras kept grinding.

The drunken sailor felt remorse and dropped to his knees at the fallen girl’s side. He murmured her name and touched her arm. Melana reacted just like a dead person would. She didn’t move. Sean thought Melana was using amazing control, especially with the bruises beginning to color her neck. He didn’t realize that acting had nothing to do with it.

The drunken sailor shook the ‘dead’ girl, and Melana flopped loosely.

“Bitch!” He dragged himself to unsteady feet. “Go ahead. Be dead. I don’t need you. I don’t need anybody!” He glared at her body, and then wove out of the hut.

“Cut! Cut!” Marty yelled. “That was marvelous. Print it! I don’t think we could go through that again.” He grinned at Sean who was re-entering the hut. “Sean, that was great! I feel about as wrung out as you must. Melana, this scene will set them on fire in the show houses. Melana, you can get up now. Melana?” He knelt and then looked up at Sean. “She’s unconscious.”

Sean fell to his knees. “Melana?”

“Don’t move her, Sean. We’ll have to call an ambulance.”

But Sean pulled her into his arms and snuggled her against his chest. “Melana? My God, Marty! I’ve killed her!”

“She’s alive, Sean. She’s got a pulse. Let’s get her to her dressing room.”

“I’m sorry, sweetheart,” Sean whispered near Melana’s ear. “I wouldn’t hurt you for the world. I couldn’t. Oh, sweetheart, please be okay.”

“Sean. We have to help her.”

“I know,” Sean mumbled. "I know."

Sean refused to let anyone else carry her, but struggled to his feet holding her and crossed the compound to her room. By the time he reached it and Marty held the door open, word had circulated and a crowd had gathered. Melana had begun to revive in the fresh air and was whimpering in her half-conscious state.

“Nothing to see here, folks,” Marty announced. “Go on back to work. Clean up the set.” He grabbed a man by the arm. “Bill, call a doctor.”

Sean deposited Melana on the cot and knelt beside her. Worry creased his face as he watched her moan in pain and cough breath back into her body.

“Melana. Ah, honey--”

When she heard his voice, her eyes opened in terror. She shrank away from him.

“I won’t hurt you anymore. I promise.”

“Get him away. Marty! Get him away.”
“Come on, Sean. You’re upsetting her.”

“But--”

“I’ll stay with her. Go on now. She needs time, away from you.”

Melana was weeping with her face turned toward the wall. Sean studied her a moment. Marty was right. Melana wanted nothing to do with Sean. He bit his lips together in resignation and left.

The next day Melana was gathering her personal articles from her dressing room when Sean knocked on the door.

“Packing, I see. When are you leaving?”

“Tomorrow,” she said, carefully folding a blouse into a suitcase.

He tried to make eye contact, but she coolly went about her packing.

“I saw the rushes, Melana. We got some great footage. The audience should hate me. I know I do.”

She gave him a look that said he should.

“I wanted to thank you for making me look so good.”

She slammed another blouse into her suitcase. “Now you can go back to America with what you wanted: a new dimension to your acting skills. What were you, afraid you were getting typecast? Well, we’ve taken care of that for you, haven’t we? No wonder you’re grateful to me.”

“It’s more than that, and you know it. I thought we were getting to be friends.”

“So did I! I trusted you, Sean! What you did to me yesterday is intolerable! I don’t know what your definition of friendship is, but it isn’t mine! Friends don’t do that to each other!”

He flinched. “How’s your neck today, sweetheart? Do you have a lot of bruises?”

She turned away. “I will heal.”

Sean pursed his lips and looked contrite. “I’m sorry about what happened, Melana. You’ve got to let me apologize.”

“Accepted,” she clipped, businesslike. “Now you may leave.”

“You can’t let me off that easily. I don’t feel any better. Besides, I don’t think you’ve really forgiven me. Let me make it up to you.”

She shoved the suitcase aside, spun to face him, and pulled her blouse down over her shoulders with both hands. Buttons snapped and flew across the room. One struck Sean’s arm and felt like a bee’s sting.

“How can you ever make up for this?!”

Melana’s throat and shoulders were covered with dark blue and black bruises.

Sean reached a hand out as if to touch the carnage he’d caused. Then he frowned and turned away
with self-disgust.

“My, God, what kind of, of animal am I? Beating’s too good for me. Death would be a favor. You’re right. I did get carried away. I’m trying to jump-start a career that I’m afraid is going to stagnate. But I shouldn’t have sacrificed you to get what I wanted. And now I’ve lost you.” He flinched. “I guess that’s a proper punishment.” He looked at her angry face and the effort it was taking her not to cry. “I’m sorry I’ve caused you such misery.” He frowned and turned away, muttering, “Don’t worry. I won’t bother you ever again.”

She saw his misery and relented. “Sean. Wait. Don’t leave this way. I will heal.”

“I wish I hadn’t done it.”

“I know.”

“How can I make it up to you?”

“I’m sorry, Sean. Please understand. I just want it over. I just want to go home.”

“It started when I saw you kissing that guy. I thought it was that other guy, Abdul, and he had won you back into an abusive relationship.”

“That was my friend, Philip. He’s no business of yours.”

“I know. But I just couldn’t stand seeing that Abdul treating you that way.”

“You were simply concerned about me, and I appreciate that. But—” She knew what she was going to say would hurt him, but she needed to establish perimeters. “It’s really none of your business, Sean.”

The pain she saw in his eyes was worse than she had imagined.

“I thought we could part as friends,” he said, barely above a whisper. “I guess I was wrong. Well, you got your revenge. I hope it helps heal your bruises. Good luck with your life, and I hope for your sake that we never meet again.” He turned to the door.

Not like this, she wanted to scream. Never see this dear, sweet man again?! For, despite the terror she had known at his hands, she realized that he had been playing a role. He was an actor, for Heaven’s sake, and a darned good one, at that. And she liked him.

Then she began to laugh.

He frowned back at her. “What do you find so funny about this situation?”

She grabbed his hand and pulled him back into the dressing room. “You, Sean. You! You’re so deliciously melodramatic.”

“I thought I was being sincere,” he grumbled.

“I know. There’s a fine line between the two.” Her eyes twinkled. “And you crossed over it, my pet.”

He raised the hand that held his and nuzzled it against his cheek. “I really didn’t mean to hurt you so badly.”

She smiled tenderly. “I know.” She dropped his hand. “Maybe you’re too, ah, enthusiastic. In fact,
there’s times you frighten me, Sean.”

“I know. There’s a dark spot deep inside me. I think Midge started it.”

“Midge?”

“My first wife. The mother of my children. At first, it was all horseplay and good sex between us. We couldn’t get enough of each other. But with the children coming, we had to grow up and become adults. We lost the magic we’d once shared.” He frowned. “Then Paddy died. And my father. Then nothing was ever the same again.”

“Paddy?”

“Patrick. Our son. Our baby. Blonde curls. The cutest grin you’ve ever seen. One day he was there, playing and running around as usual, and the next day he wasn’t. It happened just that fast.”

“I’m sorry, Sean. Really I am. I had no idea--”

“Look, this is getting us nowhere. You don’t need to hear about my past history. I’m a brooding bastard and I know it. I thought Madagascar might be different for me. Halfway around the world and not a thing to remind me of my own private hell.”

“You carry it with you wherever you go.”

“I’m beginning to realize that. Look, you go ahead and pack. You don’t need me around to pester you.”

“You said you wanted to make everything up to me. How?”

“I thought I might take you out to dinner, so you can see that I’m not a complete brute.”

She smiled. “I know that already, Sean.”

“Maybe you wouldn’t want anyone to see all those bruises on your neck and shoulders.”

“You let me worry about that! You just show up on time!”

He grinned. “Then you’ll go with me? Even after--”

“I might look frail, but you’ll find out, mister, that I’m pretty tough.”

He shook his head and grinned. “You must be.”

She hugged his arm and laughed. Then she slapped his shoulder. “Now, get out of here! I’m busy.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He rubbed his arm as if she’d hurt him, and they both laughed.

Melana didn’t realize that her blow had landed closer to Sean’s heart than his arm. Sean was equally as unperceptive. He was simply puzzled because the slap reminded him of the kiss that they hadn’t discussed. Some instinct, though, told him they shouldn’t.

Somehow Sean Murphy looked less savage wearing a tie and dress jacket. Blonde curls scattered over his forehead, and his grin was slightly infectious as his blue eyes twinkled with pleasure.
“That high neck and long sleeves on that dress sure cover up the incriminating evidence, alright.”

Melana also knew that the deep coral set off her sandalwood colored skin dramatically. It was her most flattering shade. The brushed gold of her disk earrings glowed with mellow fires. She was happy she had taken extra pains to look nice for him. The admiring glances from other men pleased Sean for he was the man lucky enough to be escorting Melana. She knew she was attractive; Sean’s eyes said so. She was flattered and yet frightened. She knew not what demons plagued him, and she didn’t know if she ever cared to know.

Sean Murphy was a casual acquaintance, someone who would fly out of her life in a few hours. For now she could offer him friendship and share a few good times together. A year from tonight he wouldn’t be able to recall her name. She would look at his face in a movie magazine and try to convince herself that she’d once known the famous star. If she was lucky, he might describe the native dancing girl that he’d killed in the chapter he devoted to the movie about Madagascar when he wrote his memoirs. He would be someone she would someday tell her grandchildren about when they refused to believe that Granny had once been in a movie.

And there would be no remorse and no regrets for either party because they didn’t mean that much to each other.

“So what happens now, Melana?” Sean asked as they dined that evening.

“Back to Cape Town. I’ve had my little lark. And you?”

“Catch up on my kids! Bet they’ve grown a foot.”

She laughed. “You’ve been gone only a month.”

“Seems like a year. Of course, there have been bright spots over here.”

“Flying to Cairo?” she asked mischievously.

“No, I was thinking more about you, Melana. I appreciate your spending time with me. I’m grateful.”

“I’m grateful, too, Sean. Despite everything, I’m glad that I had a chance to know you.”

“And I’m glad we’re parting as friends. They say that friendships that are hard-won are the longest lasting.”

“Then ours should last beyond death.”

They both laughed.

She could afford to be flippant. Tomorrow, jets would separate them forever.

They had been quiet as they walked to her apartment door.

“Good night, Sean,” Melana said as she turned and offered her hand to shake. “I did have a good time. And you are forgiven.”

He squeezed her hand. “Then this is goodbye?”

She began to laugh.

“What?” he demanded.
“Oh, Sean, you do love being melodramatic, don’t you?”

“Well, it is goodbye,” he said gruffly.

“I know.”

“And I’d like to kiss you goodnight, and goodbye, if I could find a spot on you I hadn’t beaten the hell out of.”

With a grin, she pointed to her left cheek and he aimed for it.

“Well, Sean--”

“Here’s another spot with no bruise on it,” he murmured and kissed her lips before she could refuse.

She was so startled she couldn’t say anything when he pulled away.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled. “I took advantage.” Then he pursed his lips. “No, I’m not sorry. I wanted you to see that I’m not always brutal.”

“I knew that from our screen kiss, Sean. You may have been mean at first, but then you changed to tenderness. The drunken sailor might’ve done the same thing, and it shocked him to discover that he really loved the island girl. But he couldn’t live with what he considered a weakness, so he killed her. He killed the thing he loved because tender feelings frightened him. But it gnawed at him and eventually caused his own death in the film. I think it was wonderful acting on your part. You really lived your character, and that explains that kiss we shared. You made me feel like the island girl. And even though he killed her, she understood the power she held over him, a power that was stronger than the grave.”

“You got all that from a kiss?!” he blustered. “What were you in college? A psychology major?”

She grinned. “No. Business administration.”

“You might consider changing your field of study.”

“Oh, Sean,” she said with a laugh. “That’s what I love about you. You have a wonderful sense of humor. What do you love about me?”

The question caught him off guard. “Everything,” he admitted truthfully.

“Now you’re teasing me.”

“No, I’m not.”

She studied him. “I think you’re serious.” She hugged him around the chest. “That’s what I love about you, too.” She pushed out of his arms. “Now, get out of here before we demand to be together again in another movie.”

“I wouldn’t mind.”

“And let the rumor start that I’m riding to stardom on your coattails? I’ll become a star on my own terms, if you don’t mind, Mr. Murphy,” she vowed with a sharp nod of her head.


She nodded. “And don’t you forget it!”
They grinned at each other and parted friends, friends who were destined never to see each other again.

Melana returned to her parents’ home and her temporary secretarial work. Party invitations poured in, and not all were from her friends. She had suddenly become a celebrity. Young men pursued her. It would be quite easy to marry one of them, become a young matron, and assume a position of distinction in her native city. She caught herself looking at sensible shoes and material swatches.

And then the telephone call came. She was needed in Hollywood for publicity appearances. Studio moguls had been impressed by her scenes in LIBERTALIA and thought the electricity between her and Sean that was shown on film would be a great selling point for the movie.

The only thing was that she and Sean would be thrown together again. That would be a two-edged sword of pleasure for her. She had nearly dismissed him, except nostalgically. They had said their goodbyes. Perhaps her acting career, which she had also ceremoniously buried, would be launched in Hollywood. Marriage to one of her young, charming suitors paled with the possibility that she might, indeed, realize her dream of becoming an actress.

Sean Murphy met the news of a reunion with Melana with mixed feelings, too. His life with his children, the ranch, and occasional work appealed to him. He knew, though, that publicity appearances were part of his job.

Sean was a lonely man and the bitterness of his sailor role in LIBERTALIA hadn’t been all acting. He’d had years to coddle his hurt and pain. His first wife had deserted him with three children to raise. The blaze of his bruised male ego blinded him to everything but his hurt pride. He drank a little and chased starlets a lot. Not even his father, a widower and a fine character actor in movies, could talk to him. Sean’s career suffered, but he didn’t care. He cared for nothing.

And then Paddy, the sweet and impish baby of the family, the apple of Sean’s eye, the darling of his grandfather, that dear and marvelous creation of a love now dead, sickened and died himself. It happened so quickly, so insidiously, so ghastly that no one saw it coming. And everyone was devastated.

William Murphy worried about his son Sean and even hoped for a reconciliation between Sean and his estranged wife, Midge. But Sean walked away from Paddy’s funeral with a deep anger for not only Paddy’s mother, but for all women. His drinking increased until he was nearly brought up on charges for beating up a prostitute. William Murphy pleaded with him to regain control of his life, but Sean heard no one. Once again, he was headed pell-mell down the road of ruin. And once again, a tragedy brought him up short.

In a heated plea for sanity, William Murphy dropped dead from a heart attack. The shock brought Sean to his senses. He still had a son and a daughter to raise and a career to save. Wallowing in self-pity had brought him nothing but more shame. He adopted the old cliché of ‘Nowhere to go but up’ and made it his battle cry. Luckily, the months of self-destruction had been few, and he was able to salvage much of his prestige, tarnished though it was.

Gossip columnists had spoken of him, but he’d never been a dashing movie hero, often just the sidekick of the hero, so he wasn’t too glamorous to them. His shenanigans since his wife’s desertion were hard to ignore, though, and now Sean fought back with all the determination of his Irish temper. He imported his widowed older sister to run his household and appeared free for various
charitable foundations, especially those that dealt with family living. A photographic essay of his home appeared in a decorating magazine. Snaps of him with his hunting dogs were featured in a sports tabloid. And everywhere there were pictures of him with his children: escorting Molly to a junior high dance, enrolling Stephen in a military school, vacationing with them in Colorado.

Nowhere was he more cautious than with the ladies. Photographers caught him lunching with old friends, double dating with other couples, or simply being seen talking with parents of his children’s friends. Starlets were taboo. No ladies more than ten years his junior were left alone with him. He drank nothing stronger than dinner wine. One reporter complained that Sean lived a cleaner life than his minister.

And then Sean accepted the role of the drunken sailor Fletcher in LIBERTALIA. Madagascar was a different world. Exotic women were everywhere. But none intrigued him as much as his co-star, the unpredictable woman-child Melana Clerke-Jones. One moment she was a sophisticated, accomplished woman; the next, a bubbling teenager urging him to run along the beach or feed zoo animals instead of memorizing lines. ‘Spit against the wind,’ she’d cry and run like her native impala. He’d lumber after her, not feeling their age difference, and not really caring. He was feeling young and carefree again. But, without his conscious knowledge, he was also falling in love with her. The director was the first to notice when he called Sean in to watch daily rushes.

“See?” Marty Stroh demanded. “Where the hell did you get that twinkle in your eyes? Your character is supposed to be tired of the world and jaded with life. Nothing is supposed to be interesting to you. But look at that. You look like an old rooster that’s been given a reprieve from the soup kettle.”

Sean studied his screen image and saw it was true. Love was written all over his face. He looked like an old fool.

Melana was hurt when Sean began acting coldly to her, and then she accepted that he would be leaving soon and their friendship would be over. Perhaps he was being kind so the eventual separation wouldn’t hurt so much.

A month later Sean was back in Hollywood. His part in the Madagascar movie was over, except for a few days’ shooting of close-ups. Already, his agent was sending him scripts to read. One was of a romantic lead in a comedy. Someone had apparently seen the Madagascar rushes and thought his acting had improved along with his personal life. Sean snorted with disdain. Those Madagascar rushes were only good because his inner soul had been shining through. And Melana, not the director, not the screenwriter, not even Sean himself, but Melana had brought it out.

Sean was not so sentimental to think that only one person could make him happy. He’d known many people, both male and female, who’d touched his life. Each had meant something to him. Each had influenced him, no matter how subtly or casually. But he was in charge of his life. He knew that his happiness depended on himself and on how he related to other people. At one time people thought everyone had but one true mate, his soul mate, but Sean didn’t believe that creed. Melana had made him happy in the brief time they’d had together. Her unpredictable quirks had refreshed him and helped to heal him. But his happiness did not depend on her. There would be other women in his life. He’d see to that.

Sean told himself all this as he plunged back into work. He accepted the role of the romantic lead in the comedy and sat back waiting to be called to work. In the meantime, he caught up with his children and his philanthropic work. Life began to settle down for him again, and he enjoyed the adventure. But in the shadows, just beyond the corner of his eye, lurked the essence of a graceful woman-child, laughing and serious, sophisticated and playful. Sean couldn’t quite see the presence,
but knew that it was there. And he realized who the presence was.

Sean also knew that in time, her ghost would fade away. In time, Melana would simply become a lovely interlude in his life. He would cherish her memory and be thankful he had known her.

And then Melana was in town to publicize the Madagascar movie. She felt like an old friend when Sean hugged her in welcome. Their camaraderie returned and Sean was almost disappointed that the flame of friendship crackled, not a torrid torch of desire.

They appeared on talk shows. They visited a military hospital. They hosted a celebrity golf tournament. And the quiet feeling of friendship flickered brighter.

Even though he knew better, Sean let the sharp-tongued Lenny Thornton bait him on Thornton’s late-evening talk show.

“Come on, Sean,” Thornton said in a conspiratorial voice. “Level with us. You’re seeing Melana, aren’t you?”

Sean grinned widely, even though he was booing inside. “Sure, I am, Lenny. You’re seeing her, too. She’s sitting right here between us.”

But Sean’s agent was furious. “Damn it, Sean! I told you not to trade jokes with the host! He’s a professional comedian. You’re out of your league with him. Besides, you went out there to sell the movie, not spar with Thornton.”

“Then he better shut up about Melana. Whatever is going on between her and me is our business and nobody else has a say.”

“No, Sean. It’s America’s business. You two are big news. Your scenes are really selling the picture. It doesn’t hurt for the fans to think you’re dating her.”

“Well, it hurts our friendship.”

“Friendship doesn’t buy taters for the table, Sean.” He straightened. “And you’re messing with two pocketbooks: yours and hers. Play the game, Sean. You know how it’s done. You two are living out America’s dream. You’re movie stars and dating each other. Share the glamour. What’s the harm in that?”

Sean introduced Melana to his children.

“Molly and Stephen are very nice. They look very Irish, like you. Was your wife Irish, too?”

“Gee, I guess so. Her maiden name was Kelly, so I guess at least her father’s side was Irish.”

The four rode horses at a desert due ranch, skied at Arrowhead, and played volleyball in the Pacific sand. Melana and Molly tried recipes together, and Melana taught Stephen legends about Africa. And still Melana was only a friend to Sean.

Melana found work as an extra in a movie being filmed in the South Seas. She was ecstatic because she was furthering her career.

“You don’t need to go clear to some obscure corner of the world,” Sean tried to reason. “You can go on publicity tours with LIBERTALIA.”
“Oh, but I have to take this opportunity, Sean! It might open all the right doors for me.”

“LIBERTALIA was supposed to do that, remember?” he tried to say, gently.

“Just what are you trying to tell me, Sean?”

“Melana, I’ve got to be honest with you, honey. You’re not that great of an actress.”

“That’s one man’s opinion, Sean,” she snipped.

“No, it’s several. When you were hired to do LIBERTALIA, it was because of your unique looks and your dancing ability. As far as reading lines, though, you weren’t that good.”

“That’s why I’m taking acting lessons and studying voice.”

He shook his head. “Pure mechanics. It’s a waste of time and money. You don’t have the divine spark, Melana. There’s something missing and no amount of study will ever fill in the gap.”

“A lot you know!”

“Yes, I do know. Remember I once said I knew my limitations? Well, you should know yours, too. Over in Madagascar, we viewed the daily rushes and saw you would be okay as long as you didn’t open your mouth. And we saw that in order to get a performance out of you, you were going to have to believe that you were really being attacked.”

“So, all the time you were coming to me, offering friendship, you were really just, ah, setting me up to get a good movie take?”

He didn’t like her belligerent, defensive attitude. He understood it, but he certainly didn’t like it. He felt off balance because there wasn’t harmony between them. “That’s the way it started, but—”

“How could you have been so dishonest?!”

“It didn’t seem that way at the time. Melana, if we hadn’t done it that way, all you’d be known now as is the lovely girl of mixed blood doing the native dances. Your other scenes would’ve been cut. Fletcher would’ve killed another girl. At least I saved your role in the picture for you.”

“And your role, too! You wouldn’t have ‘killed’ another girl as dramatically as you ‘killed’ me!”

“Probably not,” he admitted. “We had a chemistry together that would’ve been lacking with another girl. And we did a great job. Our work is talked about more than what the leading man and the leading lady did.”

“All very businesslike and proper.”

“Don’t do this to me, Melana. Remember that I didn’t have to tell you. I just wanted everything to be out in the open with us.”

“Not like before, apparently!” She felt tears smarting her eyes and she angrily swatted them aside. “Let me tell you something, Sean Michael Murphy! I will be an actress! A great one! I’ll become a legend! That’s something more than you can ever say!” She saw him wince and she wished she hadn’t hurt him. Then she thought of his deception and she wanted to hurt him more. “Stop meddling in my life! You’ve messed yours up so much, how could you ever think you would be helpful to anyone else?!”

“Melana--don’t--say--anything you’ll--regret.”
“I know I should bow down to the god that’s before me--”

“No, it isn’t that. When you calm down, you’ll see that I’m right. And then you’ll agonize over what you said, and you’ll worry about me. And, honey, I’m just not worth it. I know what I did, and I thought it was best for all concerned. And it was, up until the time I realized I was in--”

“The best thing for me, then, is to forget you,” she declared as she drew herself up. "Then I won’t have to agonize over it.”

A momentary flash of pure suffering suffused his face; and then he drew himself up, too. “You’re right. You need your chance. This is your time to be doing what you want. Go take your acting lessons, Melana. I wish you well. I’ll always think highly of you. Visit us out here at the ranch when you want. Me or one of the kids will generally be here. You’ll always be welcome.” He kissed her forehead. “Good luck to you now. Come on, I’ll see you to your car.”

Melana allowed herself to be led away by the brisk man who was ushering her out of his life. As she drove in numbed silence from the ranch, she felt like she’d been dismissed. A part of her was still angry, but mostly she was puzzled over Sean’s sudden indifference. It was as if he were acting the way she said she’d act toward him.

As Sean watched her car disappear, he thought he deserved an Oscar for his performance. He’d never been greater, but no camera was recording his triumph. No camera recorded his heartache, either, for he knew he’d hurt himself far worse than he’d startled her. And now she was gone, and it was his own fault.

Sending Melana to Tahiti to dance in a movie was a little like sending coals to Newcastle, and Melana realized this fact as she watched the island girls perform their lovely, sensuous dances. But she taught them her African numbers, and between the two styles they developed a hybrid dance that was new and exciting.

As Melana watched the rushes, she saw the similarities between her and the Tahitian girls. Melana gazed at a globe and realized that she had traveled nearly around the world since she’d left Cape Town. She had been told that Madagascar had much Indonesian blood and that the Tahitians were Polynesians. Surely peoples that close geographically were related through blood ties. They were all brothers under the skin, just as Sean had said.

Sean Murphy. There wasn’t a day went by that Melana didn’t think of him. The lovely Tahitian sunsets were color-splashed, and Melana wished Sean could view them with her. She enjoyed riding horseback through the surf and remembered that Sean was responsible for her being able to sit a horse at all. But more than anything, she missed talking with him. She had relied on his friendship more than she’d realized in California. Now she was sorry they’d quarreled. No, she had quarreled with him. He had merely been making a clean breast of things, because she had become important to him. That statement bothered her. That and the fact that she should have been enough of a friend to have forgiven him. She was feeling the remorse he’d predicted she’d have.

“How dear he looked standing there, staring blandly at her. No emotion showed on his face. No words came out of his mouth. She wondered if he had forgotten to breath or if he was considering her to be merely an apparition.
“Come on, Sean, you can at least say ‘Welcome back.’” she said, a little self-consciously.

“Welcome back,” he mumbled.

“You’re going to make me grovel, aren’t you?”

He said nothing, but set his jaw shut firmly.

“All right,” she said with a determined look on her face. “Remember, you forced me to do this.”

And then she surprised him so much he couldn’t move.

Melana put her arms around him and clung to him. “Forgive me, Sean,” she said against his chest. “I’ve been very foolish. But if you hadn’t been so important to me, I wouldn’t have felt so betrayed.” She looked up into his noncommittal face. Tears misted her eyes. He wasn’t going to make this apology easy for her. She shook him. “Sean! Come on. Be nicer to me than I’ve been to you.”

He touched her chin with one stubby finger, and a grin cracked his solemn face. “Got a date for the Academy Awards?”

Sean had been nominated for his work in LIBERTALIA. Another man won the best supporting Oscar, but talk was starting that next year Sean would be nominated for Best Actor for the comedy he had just finished. His career seemingly had gotten the much needed shot of pep that it had been searching for.

And now that the movie was finished, Sean was restless. All of the pent-up emotion he’d felt for Melana had been channeled into the character he’d been playing in the comedy. Now that feeling had no outlet. Once again, he suspected it was love, not friendship, that he felt for her.

Life might have gone on for Sean in this same puzzling quandary if Melana hadn’t decided to go home to Africa. He argued with himself for days, telling himself that he might ruin a perfectly good friendship with a marriage proposal. But this guessing game was putting him through an emotional wringer. If Melana got angry or insulted and turned her back on him forever, at least it would be a clean break. This halfway relationship was no way to live.

Sean took Melana to an elegant nightclub for a candlelit supper and waltzing to insipid music, but nothing happened but sparkling conversation and meeting friends who insisted on visiting a Bohemian restaurant cum mud wrestling arena. “I never knew such a place existed,” Sean muttered, but Melana merely laughed and thanked him for a delightful evening, even if her expensive dress had gotten mud spattered.

A few nights later Sean and Melana drove south on the Pacific Coast Highway, turned east up into the hills, stopped on a bluff overlooking the lights of heaven only knew what city, and sat thunderstruck at the beauty of the man-made lights below and the stars above. If ever there was a romantic setting, this must surely be it. Even a klutz like Sean should be able to get his tongue untied.

But before he could speak, other, brighter lights blazed at him and Melana. Voices hollering in Spanish and English and combinations thereof shattered the evening’s quietness. Sean never was quite sure what the lawmen were after, either wetbacks or drugs or wetbacks with drugs. Whatever, he drove away muttering, the romantic mood shattered, with Melana laughing gaily at his side.
Sean sat on a sofa in his ranch house. Melana sat in a chair across from him in the small, quiet room. Both were very serious.

“So you’re going back to Africa.”

“Yes. You were right, Sean. I’m no actress. I’m going back to school and get my degree in business administration. There are many fine firms in Cape Town I can join.”

“Southern California has schools and businesses, too.”

She laughed. “Why should I stay here?”

“To please an old friend,” he said hopefully.

“I am looking for more than friendship, Sean.”

“And you deserve more. I just wish it could be with me, but that’d be a hell of a match.” He sighed deeply. “We’re no good for each other, Melana. We bring out the worst in ourselves and each other.”

She nodded. “I know.”

“We’d fight like cats and dogs. The cops would probably always be out here. We’d threaten divorce once a month. At least.”

She breathed deeply. “I know.”

“It’s all the wrong kinds of bad I can think of.”

She frowned. “I know.”

Sean watched his fingers worry a frayed edge on the arm of the sofa. “But that doesn’t stop me from loving you, girl,” he said softly.

Melana shifted in her chair. “I know.”

“In fact, you might say, well, that I’m, ah, in love with you. And I don’t know what in the hell I’m going to do about it.” There, he’d said it. Now he was vulnerable. Now she could destroy him.

“Sean. People don’t have to get along to be in love.”

“It didn’t start out that way. It got all mixed up with Fletcher and the native girl. But even back then, even when I was deceiving you, I was loving you, too.”

“Poor Sean. You must’ve done some of your finest acting then. To seem just my friend when—” She let the sentence trail away.

Sean rubbed his face. “I don’t want to be by myself anymore. Nobody back in Africa needs you half as much as I do. You have to stay in California with me.”

“Okay.”

Sean looked up, amazed. It’d been that easy? After all his elaborate schemes, all he’d needed was a few simple words? Maybe she hadn’t understood. Maybe he’d better be more explicit.

“You’d stay?”
“Yes.

“With me?”

"Yes."

"If I asked?"

"I thought you already were."

He blinked. “I don’t get it. What did I do right?”

“I guess the time is simply right. I feel at home here.”

“Southern California can make a person feel mighty welcome.”

“It wasn’t Southern California, it was you. When I was in Tahiti, I wasn’t too far from Cape Town. One long weekend I flew home and just rattled around my parents’ house. I thought if I went there to stay, I’d feel comfortable again. But now I think the only place I’ll feel that way is wherever you are, whether that’s riding horses in the surf or huddling in a damp duck blind in Nebraska or lounging at this ranch. Home isn’t a place, Sean, it’s a person. Oh, do stop grinning like that! I expect you’re feeling pretty satisfied with yourself about now since I’m admitting that you make the sun rise and set for me.”

“Does that mean we’re engaged?”

Melana shrugged. “I guess so. I assume it’s marriage you’re offering.”

His heart leapt with the thought of simply living with her for awhile with the option of being able to walk away at any time. No, not with this one. He wanted to make a commitment so there would no doubt for anybody. Besides, he didn’t want to walk away from this one. Not ever.

“Nothing else for you, my girl.” He dared a small smile. “It won’t be easy loving a hot-headed Irishman.”

“Just wait until you’ve tried an African, Dutchman, Englishman, and whatever else I am.” She waved the thought away. “Oh, I’m getting lost on my family tree.”

His eyes were mellow with pleasure. “Never again, little one. You’re home with me. Welcome back, to stay. Ah, if you get around to it, you might join me over here on this sofa and we’ll negotiate the, ah, terms of our merger.”

She arched her eyebrow. “I’m afraid I won’t be able to keep a clear head over there.”

An Irish demon gleamed in his eyes. “That’s what I’m hoping for.”

With a delighted yip, she bounded across the room and into his waiting arms.

Sean and Melana married a month later. Although he didn’t receive the Academy Award that next year, Sean was indeed nominated for it. William Murphy had never been so honored in his long career, but he was recognized when Sean and Melana named their son after him. A daughter was christened Iris after Melana’s favorite flower.

But not all was happiness for Sean and Melana. Sean’s older children, Molly and Stephen, became
jealous of Sean’s new family. Before the marriage, Melana was simply one of their father’s many friends. After the marriage, the children saw Melana as a threat to their father’s affections. Sean was a companion to his children, but never a pal. He could’ve done more to smooth good feelings between Melana and the older children, but he didn’t. Melana had been raised in a traditional, no-nonsense manner and believed parents should be aloof from their children. And after her own children came along, she secretly sighed with relief when Sean sent Molly and Stephen to boarding schools. They were even encouraged to spend more time with their natural mother, Midge. Molly and Stephen grew up resentful, but grudgingly realized that Sean and Melana had a right to their marriage.

As much as Melana felt complete with motherhood, she still wanted a career. Sean had bluntly said she was no actress, so she used a talent she knew she possessed: dancing. Remembering the success of the hybrid dance she’d developed from Polynesian and African roots, she formed a company of specialty dancers to perform in movies and nightclubs. Her enterprise mushroomed and in a few years she found herself president of Dance International. With satisfaction, she was dealing with her two best talents: dancing and business administration.

Life was good for Melana Clerke-Jones, and she was thankful for all of her success.
Wind whipped her dark hair around her face as Barbara Crider drove her second-hand Mustang along the Pacific Coast highway near San Clemente. Her alter ego, Bambi Love was back at her apartment in a cluttered makeup case and clothes closet. Barbara Crider had decided to spend a few days being herself.

No one knew what Bambi Love looked like under her makeup. If they had ever known, they’d either forgotten or just didn’t care. In the misty world of music and drugs, few questions were asked and fewer answered. All that was important was the next song or the next drug trip.

Of course, somebody cared about money and that somebody was Dusty Aaron, the band manager for the Report Card: Three Bs and a C, the rock group with whom Barbara sang backup. She accounted for one of the Bs in the band’s name. Dusty supplied the drugs to keep the band happy. Proceeds from concerts were governed by Dusty. Singers and musicians were mostly happy to be performing.

What the other singers in the band didn’t know was that Barbara was a silent partner in the Report Card. Most of the money she had inherited from her parents was invested with the group, and Dusty was her banker. She and Dusty didn’t like each other, but got along as business partners. As long as Barbara had money to live on and got to sleep with Brad Barlow occasionally, she was happy. Brad was the lead singer of the Report Card and Barbara’s casual love interest. Barbara was not ambitious and had little concern about her future. She was singing and that was all that mattered. Some day she might get ‘discovered’ and perform solo, but until that time she was happy.

Most performers had daytime jobs. Some had families, but responsibility for dependents hampered the artists’ lifestyles. They were happier if unencumbered. That wasn’t to say that they lacked companionship. Most ‘shacked up’ with fellow artists and little attention was paid to loyalty. A different girl in bed was a delight, not a cause for incrimination. Everyone simply changed partners in a bizarre, bed-hopping square dance, and nobody was keeping score. What mattered who was doing who, as long as the birth control pills were taken correctly. Fellow band members were always good for a tumble in bed. And, if none of them was around, then there were always fans who were more than thrilled to share a one-night stand with an adored idol.

Barbara did drugs because her associates did. She never touched cocaine, however. She left the hard stuff alone because she wanted to, not because someone shook a finger at her. She simply didn’t want to start the habit. Smoking marijuana didn’t seem so bad. She felt she could drop it at any time. Brad hinted that he’d like her to try cocaine with him. She knew if she ever did try hard drugs, it would be with him.

Oftentimes when the band wasn’t scheduled to play, Barbara disappeared. That’s what she was doing this weekend. She’d disappeared so many times that nobody in the band thought anything of it. She’d remove her makeup and weird clothes, pull her long hair back with a band, don ordinary clothes, and leave Bambi Love behind. Then she’d climb into her old car and explore the city she loved. Los Angeles would have mobbed Bambi Love, but Barbara Crider passed unnoticed. No one in the band knew of her disguise, and she relished her anonymity.

And without her Bambi Love disguise, Barbara became again what she used to be: a quiet, introverted girl from a small town in Rhode Island who’d been raised as an only child by strict, unloving parents. They hadn’t meant to be cold, they were simply baffled as what to do with a child who had come to them late in life. As a result, Barbara’s goal wasn’t to marry and raise a family as most young women wanted to do. She just wasn’t a nest builder. She’d never learned to appreciate
what comes to most girls naturally.

The western sky was on fire with a magnificent sunset as Barbara stood high over the ocean and watched the spectacle. An evening breeze began to stir and gently ruffled Barbara’s loosened hair. She was alone in the world and the scene before her saddened her. The last of the sun disappeared and the cries of the gulls spoke of their lament for the loss of the day. The world was filled with sadness.

Barbara drove back into town and cruised the streets for hours until she tired of meeting the unrelenting stream of car lights. She parked along a quiet street and wandered into a dimly lit building. The little piano bar seemed like a melancholy page from some forgotten book. Nothing much seemed to be going on. A few people sat scattered around the room. More lost souls probably lurked in the shadows, wanting to stay unseen. Barbara knew she should leave. The atmosphere depressed her. This was a hangout for losers and those dregs on the edge of society. But the melancholy reached out for her, and she was trapped. The negativity appealed to her. Here she could wallow in a sea of self-pity and loneliness. What the sunset had started, this piano bar could fuel. The mood of this place was exactly what she wanted.

The piano player began to sing softly and Barbara edged closer to harmonize. The hardened girl at the piano looked up in surprise, but she didn’t stop Barbara. Their voices blended in the sad, old blues song. Applause rippled through the room when they finished.

Never quitting the keyboard, the hostess looked at Barbara sharply. “Look, honey, I don’t know what band you’re slumming from. I don’t even care if you’re fresh off the bus from Des Moines and down on your luck. Go ahead and sing one by yourself if you want. Hard telling who might hear you in here. Never know where talent agents will be. Besides, you made these jerks clap. If you want, we could even work out some kind of deal. But if you play the piano and want my job, I’ll break your fingers.” Her smile was hard and not one bit mirthful. “Got it?”

Barbara nodded. She could walk away, but some power, some instinct told her to sing. Perhaps it was the atmosphere, but she had to raise her voice to express her pain in a sad lament to the night.

“Since I For You,” she whispered, and a moment later the wistful notes of the haunting old blues song filled the air.

Barbara threw herself into the melancholy words and sobbed the sentiment to her listeners. She felt her voice growing throaty as she belted out the lyrics. Her famous sob crept into her voice, but sounded different piped through blues instead of rock and roll.

The room was hushed when she finished, and then the applause started.

“Sing another one, honey,” someone urged, but Barbara handed the microphone back to the piano player.

The eyes of the jaded woman playing the piano were wide with the first amazement she’d probably registered in a long time. “Honey, you’ve got a damn good set of pipes on you. Let’s talk deal.”

“No. No, thanks.”

“Wait! Wait, honey! Damn--”

Barbara pushed toward the door, and some man grabbed for her arm.

“Sing some more, honey!”
“No! Please! Let me go!”

Other hands shoved the man aside and pushed Barbara outside the bar.

“Come on. You’ll be safe out here.”

The voice sounded familiar, but Barbara was too rattled by her hasty exit to look at her rescuer.

“Wait! Where are you taking me?”

“To your car. Where is it?”

“I’m perfectly capable of—” She glanced up at her benefactor, gasped, and felt her mouth drop open.

The eyebrow of the handsome man arched, and Barbara heard the teasing voice that maddened Sean Murphy’s character Adam Price each week on the television show Harrington-Price. “You could always go back in there and sing Melancholy Baby for all your new fans.”

“You’re, you’re—”

“Yeah, yeah, I am.” Then his face melted into that famous grin, and the twin dimples appeared in his cheeks.

“Miles Paxton Hughes!”

“And you’re my number one fan. Yeah, I know.” He sighed, either from conceit or boredom.

“I doubt that, Mr. Hughes.”

“Oh?” He was piqued with curiosity. “Why not?”

Barbara grinned. “I know who you are, of course. I’ve seen pictures of girls going wild at the mention of your name. My admiration can’t come close to that, only a passing envy for your fame. Besides, I work, ah, odd hours myself. I rarely see your show.”

That fact seemed to upset him. “You mean, you don’t have a VCR? You don’t tape shows to watch them later?”

She shrugged. “I’ve had little use for it. I’m no great fan of television.”

“You mean, you don’t see me chase the bad guys? You don’t see me doing all those great fight scenes? I do a lot of my own stunt work, you know.”

“You mean, the studio actually allows a hot property like youself to endanger himself?”

Hughes tilted his head. She was mocking him and he deserved it. He must’ve sounded very conceited and was probably proving her preconceived opinion of him. But maybe he’d misjudged her, also. Something about this girl intrigued him. He’d felt an immediate kinship with her. Maybe they had similar interests. Maybe she was an actress out on a lark.

“Are you in show business?”

The Yankee tradition of answering a question by asking another question came to her rescue. “Why do you ask?”
"You seem to know about acting."

She laughed. "I read fan magazines. The public is educated by the studios. Or at least their versions of the truth."

The twin dimples appeared. "And more Hollywood myths are created, right? And facts are glossed over. Look, this sidewalk is no place to talk. Let's go over to my place." The grin flashed again as she flinched. "Most girls wouldn't freeze up when I throw open an invitation like that. Look, I'd like some company tonight. I just want to talk. That's all. Honest."

She tilted her head. "YOU'RE lonesome? Miles Paxton Hughes?"

"Okay, maybe I read you wrong. I thought you'd like to be friends. But if you don't want us to get to know each other--"

"Wait! It's just difficult to believe that a guy as good looking and famous as you are is picking me up."

"And it's incredible to me that a girl as pretty and refined as you are is at a place like this dump." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder to the piano bar as he talked. "Look, I'm really not hitting on you. You're the first girl in a long time who hasn't been star struck by me. I really would like to have someone to talk to. And if we're going to talk, we might as well be comfortable." He looked around. "You did come by car, didn't you?"

"Yes. All right. You talked me into it. I can follow you over to your place."

His 'place' turned out to be a darkened beach house in Malibu. The furnishings were California Modern and held no clues to Hughes' personality.

"A cleaning lady comes in once a week. I rent this pile from an agency. I'm alone here except for--"

Barbara was engulfed by sixty pounds of friendly dog. Hughes pulled the animal off her.

"--except for Bruiser here."

Barbara straightened her clothes and muttered, "Well named."

Hughes frowned. "Did he hurt you?"

"Heavens, no! Startled me, yes. But we'll be friends, won't we, boy?" she asked as she petted the dog.

"I'll get us some diet sodas." Another frown flickered over his face. "Or do you want something stronger?"

"Pop is fine." She glanced around. "This all looks very, ah, comfortable."

He handed her a cola and shrugged. "It's a place to live."

"But you don't LIVE in here. I don't feel you in this room."

His intense eyes bored into hers. "No, I don't. That place is in my den. That's where I've got my books and my typewriter."

"I thought so." She also knew that he wouldn't show her the sanctum sanctorum. Not yet. The den was a holy place. That's where his soul was at home.
“So you are a thinker.” She breathed deeply. “I’m glad that you’re not just another over-sexed hunk. Magazines can be so misleading.”

The famous grin appeared again. “So you think there’s more to me than just the jovial, semi-airhead I play on Harrington-Price?”

A grin played along her lips as she arched an eyebrow at him. “There appears to be.”

“You’ve misjudged my character of Harrington. He can be sensitive, too, and perceptive. You just haven’t concentrated on the show enough.” He motioned toward a white sofa. “Here. Sit down. I’ve got the shows we’ve done on tape. This is last week’s.” He popped the cartridge in the VCR and they settled in the comfortable, bland furniture.

“Interesting,” Barbara murmured an hour later.

“The shoot’em up? The car chases? The stunts? What did you find interesting?”

“The relationship between the two main characters. Have they always been friends? They seem to be feeling each other out, as if they’re on dangerous ground.”

Even his eyes smiled. “Bingo! Now you see the real core of the series. The development of a friendship between the two main characters is what drew me to do the show. When I heard that Sean Murphy was being considered for the other lead, though, I thought, ‘Oh, Christ, Sean Murphy?! How could I?!’”

“But why not? Sean Murphy’s been a favorite actor of mine for years. He’s an American institution.”

“Sure, but he was just a stick out there! Unsmiling. Cold. Mumbling lines. I’d liked him in movies, too, but it was just his familiarity. We were used to seeing him. But as far as his acting went, he was about as electrifying as a Boston spinster! I was set to call the series off, but it was such a sweet deal that my agent begged me to fly out to L.A. Meeting Murphy impressed me less. He was a slob. Overweight. Lazy. Taking easy roles for the money. I couldn’t believe it. But we tested together. And the results were stunning. Everything I was feeling against him showed through. I might as well have been wearing a sign. But the kicker was that Sean hated me, too, and it was right there on film! His wife had spotted me on TV and suggested me for the new series Sean wanted to put into production. The producer loved the idea, but Sean hadn’t wanted to be matched up with a pretty-faced, college boy. The antagonism between us sharpened the characters we were playing so much that they really did seem like enemies, which they practically were at the start of the series.”

“Someone must’ve thought they’d struck gold when the magic took hold.”

“The network boys went wild over the possibilities and the publicity, and they made us offers we couldn’t refuse. We started filming and the fireworks began in earnest. We started out tolerating each other and moved into open snarling. The nerves of everyone on the set were burned raw, but the film we got in the can was golden. Even we could see that we brought out the best acting in each other. Sean ceased being so one-dimensional. I became more than just an egotistical smart-mouth.”

Barbara was stunned. “Where did you come up with descriptions like that?”

Hughes grinned. “From each other. We could sure see the other’s faults. Of course, word of our battling got into the tabloids. And, wonder of wonder, our ratings inched upward. I guess audiences were watching to see us draw blood, real blood. Then something real curious started happening. When Sean and I, and our parallel characters in the series, had seared each other as much as we
could, we started accepting. We began to feel comfortable being together. We knew what made the other tick. There were no surprises left. We knew just how far we could go. We began to trust that the other wouldn’t expose our shabby little secrets. We even began to protect the other because we depended on each other for understanding and help.” He smiled softly. “Then came the day we looked at each other and realized that we were friends. Real friends. The realization amazed us both. Neither one of us had particularly wanted friendship from the other one, and we both felt awkward. But we felt good, too. Warm and, I guess, just plain good. It felt right. And as we got more accustomed to our relationship, it felt better. New and warm and, well, better.”

He rubbed his knee and stared at a spot on the floor. Then he seemed to remember Barbara and continued his story. “That weekend, I went out to Sean’s ranch and we tramped for miles out in the desert defining the boundaries of that friendship. We camped under the stars and shared a night in silence with only the coyotes for our companions. And it was wonderful. I’ve never felt closer to anybody than I did to him that night. I still do.”

“No studio hype, no publicity, just nothing but yourselves and your new feelings.”

“That’s right. When we reached the ranch house the next day, we must’ve looked puzzled about what had come out of our hostility because Melana told us she had something for us to see that would explain a lot. Curious, we watched as she popped a tape in the VCR player. The theme music for our show came on, and we both groaned. Melana held up her hand for silence. Our first show started, setting up the premise for the series. I couldn’t see the benefit of watching this first show when Sean and I were sniffing around, determining the other’s strengths and weaknesses. This might only remind us of how our hostility developed, and, worse, why. It might open all the wounds up again.

“But the tape didn’t go into the whole story, just the scenes with Sean and me. Then, I realized we were in a scene from the SECOND show, still, though, with just Sean and me. I sat up, drew in my breath, and glanced at Sean. He was alert, too. We watched intently and sure enough, the upcoming scene with the bad guys didn’t appear, just the scene after it with Sean and me bickering over the case. We’d snarled onscreen and I remembered the frustration I’d felt thinking Sean was goading me, which he probably had been. We watched in fascination as friction between our characters slowly built into a suffocating hostility. But something else was developing, too. A grudging respect, a spark of concern, a hint of understanding was slowly creeping into the relationship until there was genuine caring between Harrington and Price. When you go around saving a guy’s life, it’s hard to hate him, too. The characters were learning the other’s little quirks, pet peeves, and pleasures until they had good times to share.

“When Melana’s tape ended, Sean and I just sat there stunned. We were wrung out.”

“‘So,’ Melana said to us. ‘I don’t want you guys fighting anymore. You’ll hurt each other too much. And it tears me up to watch. Besides, you don’t really mean it. Not anymore.’

“Sean and I glanced at each other and sealed the peace treaty. Whereas our characters on Harrington-Price would always be embarrassed to admit affection, Sean and I didn’t need to have that problem.

“Sean pointed at the tape. ‘Our writers created that feud. And we let them get by with it so that it had lapped over into our real lives.’

“Melana shrugged. ‘I always said you had great writers on that program. Taken a scene at a time, cut up into the rest of the show, it was hard to spot. I noticed what I thought was a developing pattern and got a film editor to put together what you’re just seen. Guys, what your writers are chronicling is the development of a friendship as well as a working relationship. You allowed art to become life. But don’t blame your writers. You started it. They didn’t realize they’d be writing real life scenes,
but that can all be changed now. Your characters are becoming friends and you guys can, too.’

“Sean grinned. ‘Guess that’s better than staying enemies. What do you say, Pax? Ready to bury the hatchet for good?’

“I grinned at him. Nothing had ever sounds so good to me.”

Barbara stifled a yawn. “Sorry.”

“You’re tired,” Hughes said with apology in his voice. “You better stay here tonight. Wait. It’s perfectly legit. I’ve got a guest bedroom. Here,” Miles said as he threw open a door. “Here it is. Fresh and cozy. You can open the window for the ocean breeze if you want. And here. Here’s some night wear in this drawer. And there’s some odd and end clothes in the closet that you can use in the morning.”

Barbara arched an eyebrow. “And why should one of America’s handsomest heart throbs have an assortment of women’s clothing in his house?”

Hughes adopted her mocking tone. “Because he has three sisters who drop by unprepared, just like you.”

“Sisters?! Come on! I’d believe stewardesses first.”

“Susan is a stew. Brenda is an oceanographer. Maggie, or Margaret, travels back and forth with her exporter husband to the Orient.”

“You must be their favorite brother.”

“Not really. Brooks, the baby, gets that honor. Richard and I lost out.”

“There’s six children in your family?! You must’ve grown up in a herd!”

“Not really. It just seemed that way. Actually, there’s almost twenty years age difference between Maggie and Brook. But that’s another story, and you’re tired. Go on. Go to bed now before I start talking about my family and there’s no night left. There’s just so much I want to tell you.” He kissed her forehead. “Good night, my friend. My new found friend.”

“Good night.”

“Bruiser will guard your door.”

“Good Bruiser,” she murmured, too sleepy at this point to really care. Somehow, though, she knew she had nothing to worry about from Hughes.

Barb pulled a man’s numbered sweatshirt over her head, slipped between the cool sheets, and was soon asleep.

Barb awoke to gulls crying overhead. When she realized where she was, she wriggled under the covers, smiled at the ceiling, and breathed deeply of the tangy salt air.

She finally grew curious about her host. How strange to be in the bedroom of a superstar. Stranger yet, he hadn’t made a pass at her. Where was he now, she wondered. The house was unusually quiet.

And it was also deserted, she discovered as she trailed through the living room. She was tempted to glance into Hughes’ bedroom and into the den cum sanctuary, but she respected his privacy too.
much. And even though he’d talked to her like a machine gun last night, she suspected that he was a very, very private person. Sean Murphy had broken through, and for some reason Miles had sought her out. Friendship with him would be an awesome responsibility. Barb wondered if she wanted to get that involved with someone who might be only a handsome facade of a real person. Wasn’t that the classic portrait of a Hollywood star: all glamour, but no depth? But she knew he was more than a thin veneer. She detected undercurrents in him and depths unexplored. Here was the first person in a long time that Barb might really want to KNOW.

Barb spotted Miles at last, cavorting in the surf with that monster dog. My God, what an ugly creature! She’d have to remember to ask how that relationship evolved.

Barb brewed coffee, squeezed orange juice, scrambled eggs, and was buttering toast when Miles trotted into the house, Bruiser at his heels. The three fell on the meal and gobbled it up with their hands (and paws). Laughing and hooting and dog barking rang in the air. Careful, Barb thought. Don’t fall in love with him. There’s more to Miles Paxton Hughes than a handsome face and a great bed. You might not be able to handle a serious relationship with him. Remember those hidden depths.

Barb refused the offer of the dishwasher for their few dishes. When she returned to the living room, she found Miles sitting on the floor and leaning against the white sofa.

He fluttered some papers at her. “Script for our next show. Sean and Melana are due back from Africa tomorrow. We can shoot around him Monday. By Tuesday, he’ll be over his jet lag. He sure is a tough old goat.”

“Why aren’t you studying in your den?”

“Because that’s where I live, remember? Memorizing scripts has nothing to do with my inner life.”

“Your inner life?”

“The real me. The part that really counts. The preparation of the soul for its development.”

“That sounds like reincarnation,” Barb said as she settled in a nearby chair. Bruiser groaned and put his head on her feet.

“Probably. It has many names.”

“How are you preparing yourself?”

“Reading. Thinking. Writing. Questioning. Searching.”

She grabbed a safer, more down-to-earth topic. “You write?”

“After a fashion. I’ve got the spark. I lack the discipline. I guess that’s what I thought I’d get from college.”

“You went to college? Where?”

“Rutgers. I went on, of all things, a basketball scholarship. I grew up in Teaneck, New Jersey. My folks still live there.”

“How did you get from basketball to acting?”

“Very haphazardly. I’d enrolled into the literature and philosophy courses. I toyed with athletics and
law and journalism. Then I took a speech interpretation class, and I was hooked. I messed around five years as an undergraduate, and I knew my dad was getting tired of supporting me. I was well on my way to being a professional student. Then two things happened. Abruptly I graduated. And abruptly I found myself married.”

“I never knew you were married.”

“I, ah, still am, technically. Merlin and I have a very open, liberal marriage. We’re two thousand miles apart. She’s in New York City.” He frowned. “She was a speech teacher and acting coach several years older than me. She was an alumnus so brilliant that Rutgers couldn’t bear to see her leave, so they hired her in the drama department. She took me in, formed me into an actor, spit me out onto the stage, welcomed me into her bed, forced marriage on me to strengthen her hold, pushes me away, reels me in—”

“You love her very much.”

“I could kill her! No, I couldn’t. I want to reach her inner core. I want to touch that spot where she lives.”

“She intrigues you.”

“Yeah!”

“She’ll poison you. She makes you miserable.”

“Ah, sweet misery! But if that was her only hold, I could break with her. But she taught me acting.”

“She brought it out.”

“Same difference.”

“You need to fall head over balls for some other woman.”

He grinned. “And you’re offering? I’m not messing up a perfectly good friendship with you for a sticky romance. No, my little one, you are my friend.”

“We can’t be friends already! It’s only been twelve hours since we met and most of that time we were asleep, in separate bedrooms, I might add.”

“But our souls walked together in dreams. Don’t you remember?”

“There you go with that psychedelic shit again!”

“Psychic.”

“I don’t care! What are you smoking, anyway? Where do you get that gibberish?”

“I don’t smoke anything. I don’t do drugs. And I think you’d be better off without that cigarette. It’ll hurt your voice.”

She angrily crushed the smoke. “Why worry about my voice?”

“Because you’re a lovely singer. You should be a professional.”

It was like a splash of cold water on her face. Barb sobered. “Thank you.” She needed to be cool. Over-reacting would make him suspicious. And she didn’t want to leave quite yet. He intrigued her.
“That’s very kind of you to say.” She nodded her head toward his script. “Need some help with that?”

“Nah. It’s dull for other people.” But his face looked hopeful. “You know, it might work. You could read Sean’s part.”

“Me? Being Adam Price?” She batted her eyes. “Why, sir, you flatter me.”

“Sean and I get copies of both parts in case we can con someone into reading with us. We have a lot of scenes when we’re the only ones on camera. It’s intense work and we play off each other a lot.”

“You two must work like a well-oiled lock by now.”

“We do anticipate each other, alright. Sometimes it’s like we’re not acting at all. I am Noah Harrington, and Sean is Adam Price. It gets spooky.”

After running through the script, Miles decided to video tape their lines.

“There’s two cameras and they’re voice activated so we can forget them. They’ll pick up the action.”

Later Barb was fascinated with watching herself on television. And she fed lines to Miles very well, too.

Barb found cold roast chicken in the frig and made sandwiches for them at noon. She chopped up apples, celery, and white grapes, stirred in walnuts and mayonnaise, and ladled the mixture on lettuce leaves. Miles brewed hot, spiced tea and they ate lunch on the balcony overlooking the sea. Bruiser begged for chicken scraps and later Barb took him down to the beach for a walk.

Barbara had found a khaki wrap skirt, a white peasant blouse, and huaraches that fit. She pulled her long hair back with a bandanna scarf and donned her sunglasses.

Bruiser seemed ecstatic to leave. The large dog danced and jumped around Barbara, eager to be off. He paid no attention to Miles.

“Loyal dog,” Miles muttered and Barbara laughed. But she knew he was going to rest and then have a strenuous workout in the small gym he had in his third bedroom. He needed no help with either the resting or the workout.

The huaraches were no real protection against the invading sand on the beach, but Barbara didn’t mind if her feet got sandy. Gulls wheeled over her head, boats sailed on the water, and people lounged a quarter of a mile away down the beach. But for the most part, Barbara and Bruiser were alone. And both enjoyed their solitude together.

After walking awhile, Barb returned to the vicinity of the beach house, knelt in the sand, and huddled against a dune. The wind was rising and the boats out on the water disappeared to return to port. Fresh air, warmth, and the taxing wind worked their magic; and Barbara soon fell asleep. Bruiser curled against her legs and slept, too.

“You two look like ballast that’s been washed up on the beach from a storm at sea,” Hughes said as
he gently awakened them.

Barbara squinted into the lowering sun and the dazzle of Miles’ grin.

“What?” Barb asked, trying to get her bearings. “Did I go to sleep?”

“Apparently. I got to wondering where you two were. Gypsies might’ve gotten you, stealing you for your cooking ability and Bruiser for his looks.”

Bruiser lowered his ears and looked insulted.

“They’d have to be pretty desperate gypsies, then. Sorry we worried you.”

Miles shrugged. “I wasn’t really worried. Just curious. Bruiser can keep you walking for hours, if you let him.”

Smiled and patted Bruiser’s big head. “No problem here, right, boy?” She stretched luxuriously. “This is a great weekend vacation.”

Miles tilted his head. “Vacation? Here?”

Barbara didn’t want to explain about her shadowy world of drugs and rock and roll music, so she gave Miles a seemingly straight answer. “Sure. Not everybody gets to live on the ocean front. This can be a vacation spot to others.”

Miles glanced around. “I never thought of it that way, but I guess you’re right. Different viewpoint, that’s what you’ve given me, alright. And to think that sometimes I’ve thought of this place as a prison.”

“A prison?” She glanced around to see their surroundings with his eyes. “I guess it’s all in the perspective.”

He reached down for her hand. “Come on. Time to go in now. You’ll be getting chilly out here after the sun sets and the breeze off the ocean cools.”

Barbara realized that she was beginning to feel the evening’s coolness as dampness rolled in off the ocean. She stuffed her hands into the pockets of the khaki wrap skirt and wished for a sweater to cover her bare arms. As if he’d read her mind, Miles slipped his arm around her shoulders and offered her the warmth of his body. She leaned against him and enjoyed the feel of him. But it was not a sexual sensation, just one of companionship and well being.

They walked slowly down the beach in the blazing colors of the setting sun and knew that they were sharing a perfect moment together. They both realized and cherished the romantic streak in each other. Here, in this singular time, they were one in spirit.

Neither spoke. Bruiser trotted at their ankles or cavorted away from them to return with tongue lolling. As the last tip of the sun slipped into the ocean, they stopped and watched. Then the world grew definitely colder as the wind increased again.

Miles drew his arm tighter around her. “Let’s get to the house before you freeze.” He led the way. “I’m fixing a little supper. Then we’re going out to hear a new band I’ve heard about. Careful on these stairs now. The moisture is starting to condense.”

Barbara felt herself stiffen as they climbed the wooden steps up to the house. “You like music, don’t you? Last night you went to a piano bar. And now, tonight, you want to hear a new band play.”
“Yeah,” he said with appreciation. “I’m one of those frustrated singers who can only sit in the shadows and go gaga at real talent. What are you grinning at?”

“I never thought of a star as being a fan of someone else, that’s all.”

Miles shrugged. “It happens all the time. We can’t be great in all areas. Then there wouldn’t be that many stars or that many fans, for that matter.”

“I never thought of it that way.”

“Well, it’s true. Now, you go grab a quick shower and we’ll get this meal eaten.”

Barbara walked into the kitchen later with damp hair and wearing an enveloping muumuu. Miles was melting cheese for nachos and handed Barbara a head of lettuce to break up for tossed salad.

He glanced at her tumbled appearance. “I’m glad you feel comfortable enough with me to show up looking like that.”

Barbara held up the trailing muumuu sleeve and gave it a puzzled look.

Miles grinned. “Most girls would think they had to be perfect dolls for me.”

Barbara shrugged. “Doesn’t bother me if it doesn’t bother you. We’re just friends here, anyway, aren’t we?”

He gave her a soft look. “I hope so.”

“Besides,” she said as she attacked the lettuce, “we have our own disguises. And they go deeper than clothes.”

He grinned. “Don’t get philosophical on me now. Not when I’m ready to eat. That’s a whole different philosophy unto itself. It’s almost a religion, the relationship I have with food.”

“And I eat when I think about it.”

“That’s why you’ll never have a weight problem, while I,” he said with a sad sigh, “am constantly battling it. Or thinking I should be battling it, and not really enjoying while I do eat.” Then he smiled. “But not tonight. First, nachos. Then we’re having bunuelos with peach syrup for dessert,” he said as he popped a corn chip into his mouth. “I love Mexican, don’t you?”

She wanted to say that eating a dessert like that was part of his problem, but he looked so childlike in his enjoyment that she hated to bring him back to reality. She merely returned his smile.

Miles locked the front door and shook it. “I’m a door rattler. Makes Bruiser feel secure to know that he’s locked in.”

Barbara grinned at him as they walked to his car. “Bruiser, eh?”

Miles grinned back. “He’s paranoid?”

“Wonder where he picked that up from?”

Miles rolled his eyes and scratched his ribs like a monkey. “Beats me.”
Barbara laughed. “What’s the name of this nightspot we’re visiting?” she asked as she lowered herself into his car.

“The Hollow Chicken.”

She glanced up at him as he held the car door. “I’m not even going to ask.”

“Ah, come on–”

She controlled her laughter with difficulty. “Nope.”

Miles scuffed his toes in pretended frustration. “You’re no fun.”

“Shut that door and get to driving,” she ordered with a grin, “or I’ll never get to see this chicken, hollow, or otherwise.”

With a whoop, he complied.

Hughes’ black Corvette sped through the gloaming of a perfect California evening. Wind rippled Barb’s hair and quickly dried any remaining moisture from her shower.

Hughes glanced at her hair tossing in the breeze. “Most girls would be yelling at me by now to put up the top of the car.”

“I’ve got a comb that’ll straighten out the tangles when we get there.” Besides, he didn’t realize what a relief it was not to be wearing an intricate hairdo or a hot wig. What joy it was to have nothing but blush, a pale lipstick, and a tracing of eye shadow on her face instead of heavy stage makeup. “There’s nothing this wind can do that I can’t correct.”

Barb turned to look out onto the ocean and missed his look of admiration.

“It looks stormy again.”

Hughes nodded. “The sea is like a copper bowl tonight, an oily copper bowl.”

Barbara frowned. “The surface looks solid. I’m not sure I like it.”

“It’s a masculine sea. There’s no gentleness to it. It can’t be charmed or teased.”

“Such power frightens me.”

“That’s because you can’t control it. I expect you like water that’s sparkling and dainty and laughing.”

“And soothing. Something calm and blue and settling.”

“Water isn’t blue of its own accord, you know. It simply reflects the sky.”

Barb studied him. “That’s something you’ve figured out in your den, isn’t it?”

“Women are like the water, too. They reflect their men. Otherwise, they don’t feel complete.”

“I never figured you for a male chauvinist!”

“I try not to be. It’s just been my observation that most women are content to be mirrors of their men and live in their reflection.”
“Some, maybe. Perhaps they don’t want to know anything else.”

“At least they have no identity problem. I think a lot of women don’t know exactly what is expected of them anymore. And some think they have to be all things to all people, and they end up being no use to anybody, not even themselves. I sympathize with them because what affects women affects men, too. Besides, men are having their own identity crises. Ideas are changing so quickly, so radically, I think that the late Twentieth Century will go down in history as a time of great social upheaval.”

“You might be right at that,” she said, trying to digest all he’d said. It’d been quite a speech and had required a lot of thinking. She stirred herself, as if she was coming up from a deep dive in icy water. “No, no, I really think you probably are right.”

He grinned. “You were pretty deep in thought. I thought I’d lost you for good.”

“No such luck. So we’re going to hear a new band. Are they any good?”

He pulled up to a small cafe. “Judge for yourself. I haven’t heard much about them. The jury’s still out.” He held the door open, and they stepped into the small club.

Hours later, with the music still ringing in their ears, they flew along the Pacific Coast Highway in Miles’ car.

“Well, what did you think of them?”

Barb hugged the knitted shawl she’d found in his house tighter around her shoulders. The breeze off the ocean was damp and beginning to chill more.

“So-so,” she answered.

“That’s what I thought, too. The drummer was great, but the others couldn’t keep up with him. He overshadowed them. The lead wasn’t good, either.”

Barb yanked. “Too affected. The backup hated her.”

She couldn’t see his grin. “Since when do you know how backup singers feel?”

Careful. “Vibes. There were real bad vibes coming from all over that group. Not only the musicians, but the singers, too. They’d do better to split up and re-group.”

“I repeat, how do you--”

“Just like I knew about you. Fan magazines educate the public. And I’m like the guy looking at the Modern Art painting. I know what I like. And I also know what I don’t like. And I didn’t like that group.”

“So it was a wasted evening?” Disappointment sounded in his voice.

“No experience is ever wasted. A person just must figure out the best way to utilize it. Sometimes,” she said demurely with a smile playing along her lips, “a person must be very creative to find some good in everything.”

“They did have a neat name, though, didn’t they? Mock Turtle Reprieve. Don’t you just love the names of some of the groups? I don’t know where they come up with some of them. Cracklin’ Grits. Orange Morning Burn.”
She took a chance. “Have you ever heard of a group called The Report Card?”

“Yeah, but that’s not quite the name. Let’s see. The Report Card: Three Bs and a C. Wow, what a name!”

Cautiously. “Ever see them?”

“Yeah. Last year. Up at Santa Barbara in September.”

Santa Barbara. Last September. He was in the audience. So were nine thousand other people.

“There were several bands there that weekend. We were filming near there, so it worked out perfectly. What was it those letters stood for, again? Three Bs and a C?”

“The names of the lead singer and his backup.” She heard nothing but silence from his side of the car, then:

“You read it in a fan magazine. Yeah, I know.”

“Well, I suppose I did.”

“And I suppose you know their names?”

“Brad, Barby, Bambi, and Cindy.”

Hughes slapped the steering wheel. “Boy, your mind must be cluttered with useless information. If we ever play Trivia, I want you on my side.” He glanced out the window. “I suppose you even know the name of that star up in the sky.”

“Which one?”

“That one.”

“You know I can’t see where you’re pointing!”

“Well, scrunch down. There. That one. Just beyond the steering wheel.”

“The one that the handle of the Big Dipper is pointing at?”

“Yeah, I guess it is.”

“That’s Arcturus.”

Hughes slapped the steering wheel.

“What’s the only State to have a unicameral?”

“Nebraska.”

“Who invented the telephone?”

“Alexander Graham Bell.”

“Who wrote ‘The Scarlet Letter?’”

“Nathaniel Hawthorne. Miles, what are we doing?!”
“Don’t you know men don’t like smart women?’’

“You keep asking me questions I know! What am I supposed to do? Act dumb so you’ll feel better than me? Now stop pouting like an injured man with a deflated ego. Why didn’t you ask me to change feet into meters? Or who’s the President of Bolivia? I don’t know those things.”

“Neither do I!”

She started giggling softly. “Oh, Miles, this is silly. We have no reason to be fighting the battle of the sexes. We’re not competing.”

He sighed. “You’re right, of course. Again!” he hooted in mock anger. “You’re right again! Must you always be right? Again?!’’

Then they were both laughing.

“Oh,” Miles gasped, trying to catch his breath. “I can’t drive and bawl at the same time. Tell you what, are you hungry?”

“In the middle of the night?! When I’m generally asleep at this hour?! Of course, I’m hungry!”

“Good! I know a great place for seafood.”

Half an hour later, they were spooning up thick portions of clam chowder between bites of cornbread.

Miles wiped crumbs off his lips and licked them off his fingers. “I just love seafood, don’t you?”

“I thought you loved Mexican.”

“I do. I love ALL food.”

“You must have a time keeping weight off.”

“That’s one reason I work out. Sometimes, when I’m by myself, I forget to eat, just like you. Then when I’m with someone stimulating, like now, I can’t get my fill. Of food.” He grinned and the famous twin dimples popped into his cheeks, then he ducked. “Oh, oh, here come some fans.”

A couple of teenage girls had recognized him and asked for his autograph. Their boyfriends glared from a distance. The girls went off, giggling.

“Poor guys. They’d like to step right in the middle of my pretty face, and I really don’t blame them. Tell you what, it’d only be fair if you gave the guys your autograph.”

Barbara looked up startled. “What?”

Miles was grinning at her in appreciation. “Why shouldn’t the guys have the autograph of the prettiest girl in nine states?”

“That must be some mighty potent clam broth in your chowder. You’re just tired and getting a little punchy. The sun will be up before long, and we’re going to look like a couple of drunken hoot owls.”

“The sun! Yikes!” He checked his watch. “Come on!”

“Where are we going so fast?” she demanded as he pulled her toward the door.
“The sunrise!” was his only answer.

Miles drove like a madman up canyons and down steep grades. Barb had no idea where they were headed, but it felt like an easterly direction. At last, he screeched to a stop on a bluff overlooking a desert valley. Barb figured they were still in California. But outside of that, she wasn’t certain where they were.

There was a glow in the clear eastern sky and a light breeze was beginning to stir.

“Made it! It’s going to be a beautiful day. Know what? I’d just like to keep on going. The Mojave Desert is out there. Beyond that, miles beyond that, is Las Vegas.” He grew quieter. “But somewhere out there before Vegas is a little town with synthetic grass and plastic roosters. But it’s quiet, real quiet, and you can get lost in all those red cliffs. And if you listen real hard, you can hear the echoes of the Indians that used to call this land their own.” His eyes glistened as he scanned the horizon.

Barb pulled the shawl tighter and the chill she felt wasn’t just from the early morning breeze.

“What’s the name of this town?”

His eyes were still intense as he looked at her. “Oh, I haven’t found it yet, but I will. I will.”

“You don’t feel at home in L.A.?”

He fell back against the seat of the car. “A part of me does.” He played with the steering wheel. “And I know I shouldn’t be so damned ungrateful. I wanted to be a star. I wanted to be famous.”

“How does Sean Murphy handle it?”

“He grew up with it and he knows exactly how important fame needs to be in his life. His ranch is about thirty miles southeast of here. He has his aviation license and flies into L.A. to work. And he’s got Melana.”

“From what I’ve seen of them on talk shows and magazines, he’s devoted to her.”

“But when they fight--!”

“They fight?”

“Like hellcats! Sean’s bunked at my place several times. One time, Melana discovered where he was and came looking for him to continue the argument. Somehow, I got between them and took a healthy punch to the eye from a hanging plant. Rushing me to the emergency hospital reconciled them, but gave me a beaut of a shiner. But they couldn’t do enough for me.”

“Speaking of shiners, here comes the sun.”

They were quiet for several minutes, enjoying the spectacle before them.

“That’s one thing wrong with the West Coast,” Miles murmured. “We can’t watch the sun rise out of the ocean.”

“But we can watch it set into the water, and that has its own special beauty.”

“So do you, my special beauty.” He leaned toward her to kiss her, but stopped suddenly. “Bruiser! He’ll be frantic! He’ll have the cops called.” He reeled the car around and headed west.

“Bruiser, eh? That’s quite a dog you’ve got there.”
“He’s his own dog.”

“He seems devoted to you.”

Miles grinned as he watched the road. “That’s the only reason I have any control over him.”

“He looks like a hunting dog to me. Is he?”

“Yeah, but not the kind you’re thinking about. He’s at home in the surf, not fields and meadows. He’s a Chesapeake Bay retriever, if you want to get technical. He could’ve been a great hunting dog, but he’s got a hard mouth.”

“A hard mouth? You mean, like a horse when it’s mouth is so toughened it won’t obey the reins?”

“Sort of. His training got started off wrong. Chesapeake’s are a knot-headed, strong-willed breed. If not handled firmly at first, they crush the game they retrieve. You wouldn’t want to see what a dead gull pulled out of the surf looks like when Bruiser presents it to me.”

Bruiser hadn’t called the cops, but he was overjoyed to see them. He led them around the house to show them that he had indeed protected everything while they were gone. His reward of hamburger steak was eagerly gobbled up.

Hours later, Barbara awoke in the guest bedroom and showered. She threw a muumuu over her head and went looking for Miles. The day felt overly warm, but a fresh breeze spanked the incoming tide. The section of beach that Barbara could see from the window showed a stretch of deserted sand. Miles must be somewhere in the house, or gone.

Bruiser lay on the living room carpet and his tail thumped a welcome. Barbara stooped to pet him and saw Miles on the balcony. She started to call out, and then noticed that he was kneeling. His hands were clasped in his lap, and his head was bowed in prayer. Barbara felt like a voyeur. She tiptoed silently away.

Miles found her frying pancakes.

“How did you sleep?” he asked.

“Great! And this sea air makes me ravenous.”

He glanced at the pile of hot cakes. “I didn’t know I owned any pancake flour.”

“You don’t. This is Bisquik.” She slapped at his hand. “Leave that sausage alone. Wait until breakfast.”

“There’s been times I thought I should be a vegetarian, but I couldn’t stick with it. I couldn’t bring myself to give up such a major food group.”

“So you admit to having trouble dieting?”

“ Heck, no! I just toss it all in there and let my body pick and choose what it wants. I doubt if there’s any nutrients I’m low on.”

“You enjoy food. That’s what’s important.”

“Not according to my doctor and my producer. They’re always ragging at me about my weight.
Luckily, I’m young enough that exercise can keep it off.”

“And when you’re older?”

“By then, they should have found a cure for it.”

“I doubt if anything will ever replace will power.”

He pouted. “You’re no fun.”

She smiled at him gently. “Perhaps you’re right. Life, and food, are to be enjoyed. And that’s what we’ll do with this breakfast.”

He rubbed his hands in anticipation. “Now you’re talking. I like the way you think, lady.”

Barbara laughed. “Apparently, Bruiser thinks so, too. He’s already begging for scraps.”

“Smells good, doesn’t it, boy? Well, let’s dig in. It’s not too often that we have a beautiful woman cook for us.” He saw Barbara’s raised eyebrow. “Well, not too often.” Barbara tilted her head. “Not since last weekend?”

Barbara nodded and passed him the maple syrup.

They were just finishing the dishes when the phone rang. Since Barbara was closer, she answered.

“Hughes residence.”

“This is Sean Murphy. Is Pax there?”

“Der-- Blat-- I mean, Cenitar--”

Miles frowned at her.

“What?!” Murphy roared.

Barbara held out the phone to a puzzled Miles.

“Oh, Sean! It’s you. How are you doing?” He looked at Barbara and winked. “Just a fan of yours. A very impressed fan, apparently. How was the trip?”

Barbara blushed to the roots of her dark hair and left the kitchen for the deck where Miles found her later.

“Sean wanted to thank you,” he said with a grin. “Such bald-faced admiration flattered him immensely. He’d like to talk to you sometimes when you’re using English. He said his foreign languages are kind of rusty. Especially that one. He said he couldn’t even identify it.”

Barbara wasn’t amused. “He’s got a smart mouth on him.”

“I could’ve told you that a long time ago. It’s a nice smart mouth, though. Comes from being Irish, I guess.” Miles squinted against the sun. “How come you haven’t been that impressed with me?”

“Sean Murphy is a legend. I’ve seen him in movies and on television for years. My tongue just wouldn’t get untied long enough to tell him how much I’ve always liked and admired him. I feel like such an idiot!”
“I think you got your point across. He said it was the best present he’d gotten in a long time. You sounded so sincere to him. Now you’ve got two loyal guys in your fan club: Sean and me.”

“You’re teasing me.”

“I just want to see you blush again. I didn’t know girls could still do that.”

“You two are good friends, aren’t you? How lucky you can work with someone you like.”

“But not for long.”

“What do you mean?”

“The studio’s talking about canceling our show at the end of the season.”

“After only two years?!”

“Yup.”

“But, why?”

“Old show biz adage: Leave ’em wanting more. You know, that’s pretty much of an exclusive I’ve just given you. If you’re a reporter in disguise, you’d have the scoop of the year. But let me tell you, girl, I’ll deny it.”

“So that’s what you’ve decided I am? A reporter in disguise?”

“Or a pixie. Or a mirage. But Sean talked to you, so you must be real. But, you know, I don’t know if I ever want to know what you are. We should all have some mysteries in life.”

“You really are a romantic at heart.” She studied his open, boyish face. “And I’m glad I’ve known you.”

He frowned. “This sounds like goodbye.”

“It is.” She held her hand up to his protests. “I’m working up to it.” She sat up in her chair. “I need to tell you what I’ve done in the house, so there won’t be double labor. I’ve stripped my bed and put on fresh linen. I’d run my bedding through the washer and dryer, but then you’d have to fold it and put it away. I’ll just let your maid do that, if that’s all right with you.”

“You didn’t have to do any of it—”

“The clothing I used has been washed, dried, and put back where I found it.”

“You’re amazing. The perfect house guest.”

“I might want to be asked back sometime.”

“Anytime.” He caressed her hand. “I have so much to tell you. I could talk to you for a lifetime. I trust you completely.”

She frowned. “Why?”

He shrugged and grinned. “I don’t know why. I just do.”

“I could be a bad person.”
“I think you’re a better person than you think you are.”

Barbara jumped out of the chair and paced.

“What’s wrong?”

She stopped and looked back at him. “You are a very nice person. Perhaps nicer than you realize.”

“I try--”

“Don’t let anybody hurt you.”

“The only people who can really hurt me are the ones I care about.”

“That’s right. That’s why you must be careful.”

“But being careful is not really living.”

Barbara rubbed her forehead. “I feel like we’re talking in circles.”

Miles pulled himself out of his chair. “I expect most philosophers feel that way. It really isn’t all that difficult to understand. To love is to live. We have to take the chance. Otherwise, life has little flavor.”

“You really are a writer.”

Miles shoved his hands into his pockets. “I hope so. I’d like to be known as that, perhaps more than being an actor.” He paused, studying her, weighing whether to continue. “There’s something about the show that bothers me, and I don’t know if it’s a coincidence or what--”

“What’s that?”

Miles leaned his elbows on the balcony railing and looked partly out to sea and partly back at Barbara.

“Sean’s character is named Adam Price. Mine is Noah Harrington. If Adam of Biblical fame was the first father of Mankind, then Noah was the second. After all, the Flood wiped out all of Mankind, except for Noah and his family. So we’re all as much descended from Noah as we are from Adam.” He studied his hands, and then looked back out to sea. “I don’t know if the significance of those names occurred to the guy who created the series or not, but I can’t shake it. I see Christian allegories all over the place in the series.”

“You think too much.”

“I’ve been told that. Look, I’m working on a story idea. It could be the last episode of Harrington-Price.”

It was like dangling bait before a hungry fish. “What is it?”

“You remember that Adam gives Noah injections of an antidote to keep him alive. That’s the hold that Adam has on him so that Noah will do his bidding. No other doctor could help Noah. Well, my idea is that Noah discovers the shots are mere vitamins. Somewhere along the line he was cured of his condition, either through some of Adam’s medications or spontaneously. Noah confronts Adam and they split up. But it’s more than injections that bind Noah and Adam now. They’re friends. And they miss each other. They’re like a long-married couple who’ve grown comfortable with each other. A hundred times a day Noah thinks of things to say to Adam and gets frustrated when he can’t. He
has experiences that he wants to share with Adam and can’t.”

“Do they ever get back together?”

“In real life they might not. They might just drift further apart. But this is Television Land! And maybe Adam and Noah are brighter than real people. They’re not masochists. Yes, I have them settling their differences. They compromise. And they’re surprised to realize that they’ve changed themselves to be compatible. Each has subtly chiseled away on the other until they’re actually more of a blend of the two people they were before they met.”

“And how do you find a Christian allegory in all of that?”

“Simple. They’re following the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. To receive love, we must first become more loving. And that’s what they did to become friends.”

Barbara thought it out. “I see your point,” she said slowly. “Miles, have you ever considered a religious life?”

He looked into the sky and laughed without humor. “Would you believe that I’ve thought about becoming a monk? Is that religious enough for you?”

“But not for you.”

“What do you mean?”

“You weren’t meant for that kind of life.”

“How do you know?”

“Because you were meant to live in the world, not away from it. You have a fine mind that you’ve educated, and you can use it to think through problems. You can’t learn all this knowledge and keep it to yourself. You must share it with the world, either by writing or by acting. You must give away your knowledge to keep it.”

He grinned broadly. “Of course! That’s it! You’re right!” He grinned at her. “So that’s what’s been wrong with my thinking. I thought if I didn’t shut myself away in a cell, I was denying my destiny. But, actually, the reverse was the truth. I have to live in the world! Now I don’t have to feel so guilty by not being a monk.” He grabbed her hands. “I was wrong. But you, you just showed me the error in my thinking.” His eyes shone at her. “Do you know what you’ve just done for me?”

His enthusiasm made her feel uneasy. “I can imagine.”

“You’ve given me peace. With just a few words--”

“You would’ve seen it, eventually.”

“I knew I would receive a sign, I didn’t know how or when, and then you appeared.”

“We are all searching, Miles. I’m glad I helped you by saying the right words. Maybe, when I develop a faith as great as yours, then I’ll be ready for my sign, too.”

He clasped her hands tightly and intently studied her face. “Let me help you now.”

“The time isn’t right.”

“But--”
“But I love you for the offer, my friend.”

He pursed his lips in frustration.

“Miles. You have opened my eyes to several situations in my life. I thank you for doing that. Now I have to think about them.” She reached up and kissed his cheek. “Goodbye.”

“But--”

“Goodbye. Goodbye for now.”

“You have to leave already? Will I see you again?”

She put her finger to her lips. “We walk in dreams, remember? You told me that, and I know that you believe it. Maybe, in time, I’ll realize that, too.” She stopped to pet Bruiser one final time and then was gone out the front door.

Miles heard her car pull away and thought the house grew a little dimmer without her presence. He stared at the door for a long time. At last he shook himself out of his reverie and crossed the room to a favorite chair. As he passed Bruiser, Miles saw the big dog look at him and thump his tail slowly with what Miles could only interpret as doggy sympathy.

The house felt strangely empty to Miles. The sun still shone as brightly and the ocean still roared as majestically, but something was missing. Miles had always been satisfied to stay here with only Bruiser for company. Now he felt oddly discontented.

He picked up his script to study, dropped it, and stared out to sea. Somehow the girl seemed to be part of the ocean. She seemed to be everywhere, but nowhere that Miles could touch. And that’s why the once familiar world suddenly seemed so lonesome to him.

Oh, well, he had a life to live and obligations he owed. He couldn’t be mooning over a causal acquaintance. He had work to do.

But he still couldn’t quite get her out of his mind. She lurked on the horizon, ready to re-enter his consciousness if he let his thoughts stray.

It wasn’t until nearly an hour after she’d left that Miles realized he hadn’t gotten her telephone number. How did he let that opportunity slip by when he was famous for being a Casanova? He sucked his breath in sharply. Sure, not getting her phone number was totally stupid, but it got worse.

Hell, he didn’t even know her name!

Miles dropped into a chair, stunned. Was he really that self-centered? Could he be with someone a whole weekend and not even ask for her name? She must think he was some sort of egotistical ass. And she’d be right.

Miles concentrated. What did he know about her? They’d talked all weekend and she must’ve told him something about herself. He played a detective on television, so surely he could solve this mystery.

Let’s see. She was about his sister Brenda’s size because she’d worn Brenda’s clothes. She could cook and clean up after herself so she wasn’t used to being waited on.

She read fan magazines and knew a lot about general information. She was either a college girl or self-educated or both. She had a terrific voice because he’d heard her singing at the piano bar.
And he had her on videotape!

Miles sorted through his tapes, snapped one into the machine. It was the wrong tape, so he snapped another one in.

The practice reading of the next show of Harrington-Price came on. The girl was no actress. But he shouldn’t judge so quickly. She’d simply been feeding him lines. After all, this wasn’t a screen test. She had a certain style and ease of movement. She had a stage presence. Perhaps she wasn’t a stranger to performing. And there was that unforgettable voice that he’d heard at the piano bar, too.

Miles marked the tape with his mystery girl on it so he wouldn’t lose it. Something told him he wouldn’t find her at the piano bar again. Her first appearance there had been a quirk, just as his being there had been.

He was also fairly certain that she wouldn’t sell the story of their weekend to a tabloid. Whatever the truth about her might be, Miles felt she’d want no publicity, either.

He’d told her he thought everyone should have some mysteries in life. Now, he had a genuine one, and she was the cause of it. Oftentimes he savored it, but sometimes he cursed it. The truth of her identity plagued him, no matter how much his romantic side relished the sweet agony it caused him.

But, as with all great heartaches, the pain gradually subsided and took a proper back seat to his workaday world. But he knew it was still there, ever ready to be brought forward whenever he wanted to feel melancholy.

Barbara never returned to the piano bar where she’d met Miles Paxton Hughes or to his rented home on the oceanfront. She watched the show she’d rehearsed with Miles and felt her skin prickle with the familiarity of the scenes. She saw how Miles and Murphy related to each other. Hopefully, Murphy could help Miles. As for her, she would remain an enigma to Miles. Already the weekend was beginning to feel like a dream to her. But forever she would feel the wind stringing her hair around her face and ruffling the long skirt around her ankles.

Barbara wondered how Miles was remembering their time together. Was it dreamlike to him, too? Was she some displaced sprite to him? Or had he forgotten her altogether?

She couldn’t accept that possibility for two reasons. First, her ego would be crushed. Second, he seemed too sensitive and too grateful for her presence. Hadn’t she seen him in prayer? Hadn’t he kept calling her his friend?

And what of the other possibility that kept nagging at her. He’d said they’d walked together in dreams. He’d frightened her when he said it, but the awe of the possibility remained. What if he made her a better person than she thought she was? What if they still walked together in dreams?

Barbara went back to her world, and routine living took over her thoughts. Her job as a Kelly girl permitted her to work when she wasn’t busy with the band, but didn’t interfere as a steady job would. She loved the challenge of changing jobs so quickly, and the freedom she had to sing with the band.

Socially, the only thing that changed was that she stopped her casual dating and began a fairly torrid affair with Brad, the lead singer for The Report Card: 3 Bs and a C. He even wrote and recorded a sentimental song in honor of her:

Bambi, don’t you cry for me
If you’re all alone.
I didn’t mean to hurt you, girl;
Your darlin’s coming home.
That little fight sure hurt us, girl;
We mustn’t stay apart.
How could you turn your back on me?
Your love’s inside my heart.

For no reason that anyone could explain, the song took off. It didn’t make number one. Far from it. But, much to Barb’s embarrassment, the insipid tune seemed to be playing wherever she went. It had a certain appeal to people, and fans embraced it.

Before they realized what was happening, the band was an overnight success which had taken three years to happen. There were television appearances, and then the record went national. Before the frenzy was over several months later, the song had climbed to number twenty-eight, and Barb had gained a nickname. Forever she would be known as Bambi Cry. The cameras never failed to single her out singing backup and always registered Brad’s admiring glances as he sang the hit just to her. Millions of young girls sighed, wishing they were lucky enough to be Bambi Cry so they could forgive Brad. Bambi’s eccentric hairdo and clothing was recreated all over the country, and she started several fads that took nearly a year to die down.

The excitement gradually ebbed away, though, and the band members went back to their old routines. But now they were at least known outside their own circle.

A couple of years passed in this same vein, and Barbara saw no reason for her life to ever change. She and Brad were a steady item, and Dusty kept salting her money away in a bank account. Barb was contented.

It was at a concert at Long Beach that Barb brought the house down with her rendition of The Unchained Melody. Meant merely as a filler to rest Brad, fans of rock bands had begun to watch for the song. The guitars were heavy, the drums boomed, and Barb screamed the high notes with gusto. It was a crowd pleaser. Barb could have done anything behind that gaudy makeup and weird clothes. She was playing a part.

She tried not to think of a recent sour note in her life. A talent scout had offered her a record contract, and Brad had become jealous and angry. He’d acted like a small child by throwing a temper tantrum and threatening abuse to her or to himself if she left him. She wasn’t exactly in love with Brad, but she respected their relationship. The band was her family and had been for several years. She couldn’t walk away from all that. How could she make it on her own?

After the show that evening in Long Beach, the band was told that some Hollywood celebrities had been in the audience and now wanted to meet them. Hollywood celebrities? Who could pass up meeting someone famous? Who could it be?

Barbara was as curious as her band mates while they waited.

And suddenly there was Miles Paxton Hughes within fifteen feet of her. Barbara’s hand flew to her face. She had the sudden feeling that her makeup had disappeared. Miles would recognize her.

No, he won’t. No, he won’t, she kept saying to herself as Dusty Aaron spoke words of introduction that made no sense through the buzz in her ears.

Barbara had a moment to collect herself, and then Miles was clasping her hand and grinning into her face. Both the handshake and the grin were as warm as she had remembered. She looked at her feet
and mumbled something. Then she was drawn up to his face. A gentle warmth glowed in his eyes as if he felt very comfortable with her and didn’t understand why but accepted it, anyway. Barbara relaxed and gave him an open, genuine smile. They both laughed like nervous teenagers.

“I really am honored to meet you, Mr. Hughes.” She looked at him intently and used the opportunity to study him. His face and shoulders appeared fuller, more fleshed out, as if he’d gained more weight. Barbara wondered idly if he was losing his battle with food and had to stop herself from asking.

“The pleasure’s all mine,” he gushed. His twin dimples twinkled as charmingly as ever. His brown eyes looked appreciatively at her and seemed almost shy. Of course! He was a music fan and would have heard of her, of Bambi Love, and had probably seen her perform many times. He was merely an admiring fan meeting someone with a voice he idolized. The furthermost thing from his mind was thoughts of an uncomplicated, fresh-faced girl who’d once spent a platonic weekend with him.

His eyes sparkled with warm brown fires as he squeezed her hand. “Bambi? Miss Love? The name certainly fits you. May I say you have a most extraordinary voice. I got goose bumps all over when you sang The Unchained Melody. Thank you for a wonderful experience.”

Would he recognize her? His eyes said her appearance didn’t give her away. Would her voice? Her actions? What if she made certain he wouldn’t associate her with that long-ago girl?

“Thanks, ducks! You do great things to me, too. Love those tight pants you wear on the tube.”

Miles noticeably recoiled. So he liked girls to act like ladies, did he? Then his twin dimples returned as he re-categorized her. “Glad I can satisfy my fans.”

“And maybe your fans can satisfy you, too.”

“I didn’t realize that you were British.”

“And I didn’t realize that made any difference to you American men.”

He frowned at her blatancy and almost winced. She was acting like a whore, and they both knew it. A one-night stand might be in their immediate futures, if they so wished. Miles would be stupid to turn down anything so freely offered. Most men wouldn’t turn it down.

But something told Barbara she mustn’t. The memory of that weekend with Miles couldn’t be sullied. And she couldn’t betray him by being someone she wasn’t.

“No, I mustn’t,” she whispered without the British accent and sounded amazingly like Barbara Crider. She hoped he hadn’t noticed.

But Miles reacted like a gentleman. He placed her back into the lady category, and he felt protective. He frowned, this time with concern. “Miss Love? What’s wrong?”

It was getting too personal. She couldn’t tell him anything without telling him all of it. And she mustn’t let him guess.

That, plus a reckless abandon, made her reach up and pull Miles down to her face. The result of catching an open-mouthed guy off-guard wasn’t so much a kiss as it was a messy side-swipe. Barbara heard him grunt in surprise. Then he grabbed her shoulders and managed to form a proper kiss before she pulled away. He absently wiped his mouth with the back of his hand as he stared at her in wonder. The cheers and applause of their audience finally brought him out of his reverie, and he turned to acknowledge them. Then he turned back to Barbara.
“Thanks, Miss Love. I’m sure I’ll never, ah, forget that.”

“Maybe we’re both fans,” she murmured softly.

“Maybe.” He was trying to recover from his surprise and embarrassment. “Well, thanks again, Miss Love, for seeing us--”

He was leaving. Whether she wanted him to go or stay, she couldn’t know. Nor could she say later on when she recalled the scene. She just wanted something, ah, more, but she didn’t know what that something was.

She wanted him to recognize her, and she didn’t. So, whether it was in anger or over-confidence, Barbara uttered the next words hastily: “What say, you big bruiser? Since I fell for you, we could walk through dreams together and make beautiful music in the surf at Teaneck and leave all the philosophers to their religious studies.”

“What?” Miles questioned as he turned back to her. He frowned and stared at her with open-mouthed surprise. Then he closed his mouth as if he were remembering what’d happened when he’d last offered her an open mouth.

Actually, he was trying to figure her out. Was she talking gibberish through a drug-induced haze? Or was it some exotic code?

For reasons he didn’t understand, he suddenly thought of that nameless girl who’d once spent a platonic weekend with him. Why he’d thought of that angel, he didn’t know. She’d been simplicity and nurturing. There was no similarity between her and this psychedelic singer from a third-rate band.

Discretion told him, Run.

“Well, thank you again, Miss Love, for a wonderful experience. You are truly a remarkable singer. It was a pleasure meeting you.”

Miles turned away before she could answer. Deep in thought, he josted through the crowd. Bruiser? His dog? Teaneck? His hometown? Surf? The location of his beach house? It all could be from fan magazines. But since I fell for you? That was the song that nameless girl had sung in the piano bar, the same girl who read fan magazines. They’d discussed philosophy and religion. And he’d told that girl that they walked through dreams together. How--? Coincidence? No two girls could be so unlike. And yet--

Miles Paxton Hughes turned around, but Bambi Love had been swallowed up by the crowd. Now there were two mystery girls in his life. Miles knew the name of this one, but did not know the person behind the name. He had not looked into her soul the way he had had he known the soul of nameless girl’s. And surely Bambi Love had been playing a part so cleverly this evening that her own mother wouldn’t have recognized her. Two girls so dissimilar, so mysterious, with nothing in common except voices that haunted his soul.

That voice-- That voice!

“Miles! There you are. I lost track of you. We have to be getting to the party.”

His blonde date claimed his arm, and Miles forgot about Bambi Love and that nameless girl from his past, and their glorious voices.
“Fasten your safety belts, please,” the flight attendant announced. “The plane will be landing in Jackson, Tennessee, in a few minutes.”

Jessie Horne awoke with a jolt and stared at the square of bright blue sky just beyond her elbow. What the hell was she doing up here in an airplane and why the hell was she going to Jackson, Tennessee?

“Better fasten your seat belt, my dear.”

Jessie stared at the kindly face sitting beside her. Everyone should have a grandmother who looked like this woman.

“Your cousin is meeting you to take you to your father’s wedding. Remember?” the elderly lady prompted gently.

Jessie shook her head to clear it and fumbled with her seat belt. “Oh. Yeah. Thanks.” It was coming back now, but in scattered pieces. What had Chad given her to drink, anyway? Yeah, she needed courage to fly, but she should at least be coherent.

“You were awfully tired when you got on the plane in Charlotte, my dear Why, you never stirred at our stops in Knoxville and Nashville. You said your band had been on the road for several weeks without rest, and you wanted to catch up.”

Jessie rubbed the back of her neck. One-night stands and Chad’s going away party for her were a wicked combination. She was twenty-eight years old, but knew that she looked thirty-five. Life on the road with a band does that to anybody’s youth. Maybe she could get some rest during this month she’d taken off, but she doubted it. Mama would be in a tizzy over Daddy’s marriage. Nobody would get any rest around Mama, especially Jessie who was bunking in with her.

She sighed, then smiled at her traveling companion. “You’ve been very kind to me. Thank you very much, Mrs.--Mrs.--”

“Jones,” the elderly woman answered softly.

“Oh, I’m so sorry. I do remember now that you told me your name.”

“Don’t worry about it, my dear. You were awfully tired, and upset. I understand that people have to steady their nerves someway. I don’t approve of alcohol for myself, but I don’t begrudge it to someone else. We need to take our courage where we can find it.”

Jessie’s smile deepened. “You’re a dear, Mrs. Jones.” For one sinful moment, she wished she could take Mrs. Jones home with her. She would be an anchor in the stormy days ahead. “You’re going on to Memphis, aren’t you?”

“Yes, my daughter lives there.”

“You have a good visit, Mrs. Jones.” On impulse, she reached over and hugged the kindly lady.

“You, too, my dear,” the lady responded as she gently patted Jessie forearm. “I hope everything will work out for you.”
Jessie nodded her head and patted Mrs. Jones’ hand. She hoped so, too.

In the airport Jessie claimed her luggage and looked around for her cousin Beau. Her springy, dark brown hair was tucked behind her ears and hung below her shoulders in soft ripples. It and her clear blue eyes were her best features. She considered her face too horsey, and Mama thought her frame too skinny to be interesting. Mama should know. Mama always looked plump and cuddly. She was the type that men liked to take care of. The trouble was, Mama spoiled her chances with men by being too acerbic. That’s one reason Daddy had left her.

Jessie raised a dark eyebrow. At least she wasn’t caustic like her mother. The guys in the band had accepted her okay. Chad had found her interesting, despite her plain looks. And Luke had been in a fever over her. When Luke sobered up from his latest drinking bout, he was going to raise hell about Jessie’s absence. Let him stew. Maybe he would appreciate her more. Sometimes Jessie didn’t like his possessiveness or quick temper. She didn’t care if he could play a hot fiddle and was headed for the top. He didn’t have to use her for a punching bag.

Maybe he wouldn’t have two thoughts about her when he learned she was gone. Their affair had been winding down anyway, and Jessie had seen wanderlust in his eyes. Everyone knew that Luke was using the Culpeppers as a stepping stone to a better job. Jessie would do the same thing if she was as talented as he was.

Jessie had accepted the limitations of her talent. Ten years ago, after high school graduation, she knew she was going to set the Grand Ole Opry on fire. Instead, and by pure luck, she managed to become a backup singer in a country-western band. The Culpeppers had achieved just enough success to keep the group together. They weren’t big-time by any means, but were solid enough to appear at county fairs and revival meetings. An occasional television appearance caused a ruffle of excitement for the group, but they still were waiting to make their debut on the Opry. A lot of the success for the group was owed to the banjo picker who also wrote songs. Gaylon Marrick could’ve moved on to brighter lights, but he seemed to like being with a simpler band. Jessie guessed he was also lazy. Talented, sensuous, lazy, over-weight, he was also attractive to Jessie. She’d gladly jump into his bed, but his wife was a possessive hellcat. Gaylon was too lazy to cheat on her.

Jessie dusted non-existent lint off her Levi jacket and slacks. She favored red plaid and denim, gored skirts and ruffled collars. Cowboy wear was high on her list of wearing apparel. A brown leather jacket with long fringe was her favorite. She knew she probably looked a little corny, but she was dressing for her career. There’d be plenty of time for shirtwaist dresses and pantsuits when she settled down and raised a family. But that would be a long, long time from now.

No one had been more surprised than Jessie when her father phoned with the news he was remarrying. Like children of divorced parents everywhere, Jessie had always hoped her parents would remarry each other. But Wayne had tried to explain to his daughter that he’d simply outgrown her mother Billie. Three years had passed since her parents’ divorce, but now was the first time Jessie had finally accepted it. She knew her mother never had, either, and probably never would.

Jessie sighed. Where was her cousin Beau? She hadn’t planned this trip home. That’s why when it came up so suddenly, it had sounded so tempting. And Chad, the manager, had insisted. Jessie hadn’t taken a vacation in a long time. The rest would do her good.

When Jessie looked, really looked, in the mirror, she could see what Chad had seen. In a dark bedroom she was beautiful, but in bright daylight she needed some improvements.

Harsh lines marred her complexion. She’d seen too many hard nights and not enough pleasant days.
Coffee and cigarettes weren’t a nutritious diet, especially with a generous lacing of alcohol. Singing had been her life, but she needed a change of scene. A trip back to her childhood home seemed like a great breather. Maybe everything would turn out alright, after all.

“Jess!”

She turned with a whoop and was engulfed with a big grin and muscular arms. Beau felt good, damned good, and tears stung at the back of Jessie’s eyes. Where they’d come from, she didn’t know. But she suddenly found herself sniffling.

“Jessie, Jessie, Jessie. It’s good to see you, girl.”

Jessie was aware of the smell of hay and the feel of sun-heated clothing. She pushed out of his arms and wiped her eyes.

Beau grinned. Darned he was cute! He was her childhood protector, the brother she’d never had. Her first big crush. Too bad he was her cousin.

“Smog?” he asked as his grin deepened.

She sniffled. “Something like that.” She noted his blonde good looks and cowboy attire. “Nancy seems to be feeding you good.”

Beau winked. “More than one way to eat, Jess.”

The young boy beside him turned away, but not before Jessie saw a grin.

Beau didn’t realize how much savvy the boy had.

She stepped forward. “Don’t tell me this is Davy?”

Beau beamed with pride. “Yes, ma’am. Turned ten last month.”

“On George Washington’s birthday, right?”

It was Davy’s turn to beam. “You know when my birthday is?”

Jessie and Beau both laughed.

“Son, she was right there with me when you made your first appearance in this world.”

“She was?”

“Yup. Time was, she never went anywhere without me. Then she decided to do great things in this world and left me behind in the dust.”

“Behind as an anchor, you mean,” she murmured as she stroked Beau’s chest. “Everyone needs someone to come home to.”

He winked. “You mean Aunt Billie?”

She swatted at his chest and he laughed.

Beau grabbed her luggage. “Come on, Davy. We have to get Jessie home. She’s been away a spell.”

“Jessie— Miss Horne—” Davy started as they walked toward the car.
“I’m kin, Davy. Call me Jessie.”

“That’s hard to do with you being a celebrity and all. Why, I’ve even seen you singing on television. Wait ‘til the guys hear.”

“Davy, you do a soul good.” She rewarded him with a hug.

They whizzed along in Beau’s old Blazer. Jessie gazed out the window absorbed the greening countryside.

“Miss it much, Jess? Out here where you grew up?”

“I thought I hadn’t.” She looked at Beau. “But now it’s looking pretty good to me. Tell me, how’s the family?”

“Well, your daddy’s making the big news. Everyone else is doing pretty good.” A frown furrowed his brow. “Except Shell, I guess.”


Beau glanced in the mirror, and then negotiated a turn. “Guess the best lawyer in five states.”

“Brian? He’s a little shifty and arrogant, but he wins cases.”

“He might’ve bitten off more than he can chew this time, Jess, although he doesn’t think so. Maybe you’d forgotten that he’s prosecuting attorney now for Hickory County.”

“I’d forgotten. You lose track of little things like that when you’re away from home.”

Beau grinned. “Brian would never forgive you for that remark. There’s nothing about himself that he considers a little detail.”

“I doubt if he even cares what I think. His family always thought they were made of a finer clay than the rest of the world.”

“Never bothered me much. I’ve got Nancy’s brothers to chum around with. Brian invites me up to his hunting lodge sometimes. He gets a kick out of showing the poor relations a good time.” He shook his head. “Other people have cabins where they stay when they go hunting or fishing. Brian Conyers has a lodge.”

“He always went first-class. That’s why he married Shelly.”

Beau frowned. “Being runner-up for Miss Tennessee might’ve been the worst thing that ever happened to my sister. It brought her to Brian’s attention.”

“I still don’t see what Shelly’s problem is. What can be so bad about being married to a prominent attorney and living in a mansion?”

Beau glanced at her. “You have been away a long time, Jess. Brian’s brilliant, all right. But he and his uncle get away with murder. He and Dutch Conyers are into shady real estate dealings. There’s a dummy company over in Memphis that really fronts for them. I don’t know how it all works, but it’s not ethical. And Brian just smirks about it. You can see how satisfied he is with himself. He knows he’s smarter than the next guy. Trouble is, he treats Shelly the same way. Like she’s stupid or something. He acts like he’s doing her some big favor letting her be married to him. But that’s where
his fidelity stops.”

“He knocks on other doors?”

“Nothing out in the open, mind you. He likes the cat-and-mouse game of seeing some gal on the side. Like it’s some great adventure, instead of just old-fashioned adultery.”

“Can’t Shelly leave him?”

“Not until he’s through with her. Besides, she’s never held a job. And she’s got four-year-old twin boys to raise. She’s a homebody, Jess. She never wanted a career like you did.” He grinned softly. “I never saw two cousins so different that way. You always were the leader. Shell just tagged along adoringly.”

“When I could get her away from her dollies.”

“Mama would say: Beau, go find out where those two girls have gotten themselves off to. And we’d both know you’d led Shell astray again.”

“Sort of the way Brian has done now.”

“Doggone it, Jess, Shell really does have backbone. She’ll find it someday and leave Brian.”

“It isn’t just that, Beau. She meant her wedding vows. She got married forever.”

His eyes sparkled at her. “It takes Jess to look at things right. You’ve been gone too long, Jess. It’s time you were coming home for more than to visit us. Wish it was for good.”

“Me, too, Beau.”

He looked surprised. “Aren’t you happy, Jessie?”

“Maybe discontented. The band manager thought I needed a rest. Maybe that’s all I need to bring everything back into focus.”

Beau stopped the pickup and squinted at the trailer house before them. “Well, time to find out. Here you are.”

Jessie sighed. “I don’t know if I’m ready for Mama.”

“I understand that Aunt Billie’s hopping mad about Uncle Wayne remarrying.”

“And I’ll be in the middle. As always.” She glanced at the trailer. “Well, delaying things won’t help. Might as well face the music.” She got out of the pickup. “Thanks for coming to get me, Beau. Nice seeing you again, Davy.”

Davy grinned. “This time I’ll remember you.”

She grinned back, and then drew a deep breath. “See you at the wedding, guys. I’ll need you for moral support.”

Beau winked. “We’ll be there, Jess. Nancy, too.”

She smiled, waved goodbye, and watched the old blazer drive away. She trudged up the sidewalk and failed to notice a curtain move gently in a window across the street.
“Hello, Mama.”

Billie blinked in the bright sunshine and smoothed bleached blonde hair back with a dimpled, plump hand. She looked older than Jessie remembered, but part of that was self-neglect. Thirty pounds must’ve been added to her short frame, along with eye-makeup that was much too harsh for her pale skin. Jessie’s money had freed Billie from the drudgery of being a waitress, but she had nothing much to do now except eat chocolate creams and watch television.

“It isn’t much of a room, but I think you’ll be comfortable,” Billie mumbled in a disinterested voice. Jessie must have interrupted her mother’s nap.

Jessie glanced at the studio couch in the tiny room where Billie kept her sewing machine. The scarred dresser from Jessie’s childhood bedroom welcomed her. The miniscule closet would adequately hold Jessie’s few personal clothes.

“Looks fine, Mama. I’ll unpack later. Oh, look! Oscar!” She smiled and picked up a rumpled rag doll from the chair.

Billie smiled. “Thought you’d like to see him. He’s the only toy I kept for you.”

“Oh, he’s just perfect.” She hugged the doll, and then returned him to the chair. “What a nice welcome. Thanks, Mama.” She lowered her defenses and hugged Billie.

Billie wasn’t made for sentimental fuss. She pulled away from Jessie. “You must be tired. Come and have some tea. I’ll get the water boiling.” She marched out of the room, leaving Jessie feeling deserted once again.

Billie had never been a warm person. She didn’t know how to be. Even with her child and her husband, she’d been distant. Jessie had often wondered what’d attracted Wayne to Billie. Early pictures showed Billie to be quite pretty, and older people told Jessie that Billie had been a good singer. She and Wayne made a handsome couple. Wayne didn’t realize until too late that Billie was self-centered and had a sharp tongue. He’d stuck out the marriage for years for Jessie’s sake. Besides, staying with Billie was easier than breaking up with her. She had a foul temper and Wayne was rather easy-going. Then, when she started to lose her looks, she took it out on Wayne and he finally left her.

Wayne and Jessie had always gotten along, but had never been buddies. Fathers didn’t do things like that back when Jessie was growing up. She had gone to other relatives for companionship. Oftentimes, thinking back, she couldn’t remember being with her parents or doing things with them.

Billie motioned toward a sofa in the living room. “Take a load off. Do you take sugar in your tea?”

“Plain.” She’d stopped herself from saying, ‘Straight.’

“Tea’s a good excuse to use sugar.” Billie shoveled two teaspoons of sugar in her drink and swirled it with an avid, expectant look on her face.

Jessie turned her eyes from the sticky mess. “The trailer looks nice, Mama.”

Billie shrugged. “It ain’t much. The divorce settlement didn’t leave me rich.”

Jessie steeled herself. Here it came: the tirade against her father. Maybe she could sidetrack Billie.

“I send you money, Mama. You could get a bigger trailer.”
“Then there’d be more to keep clean.”

“Well, I never thought about that—” She let her voice trail away. Another topic came to mind. “Beau says that Shelly isn’t too happy.” Too late she realized her mistake.

Billie’s rheumy eyes snapped. “Man trouble! They’re all a rotten lot. You’re smart. You never got tied down to one. They’ll keep you until you lose your looks, and then cast you aside for a younger woman.”

“Mama, you know that isn’t true. Daddy wasn’t seeing anyone when he left you. He just got an itch to leave.”

“And now a younger woman’s gonna help him scratch.”

Bingo! The topic of the day had been reached.

“Do you know her, Mama?”

“Somebody he met up in Nashville. She’s got a young boy. Wayne will probably have to raise the brat now.”

“Daddy said his fiance was a nurse, so she’ll have some money for her son.”

“But she’s too young for him! The old fool’s lost his sense! She’ll put him in the ground, the way he likes goin’ after the young stuff!”

Too much information, Jessie wanted to say. Children liked their parents married to each other, but apparently living in some sort of platonic relationship. No child, not even grown ones, liked to think of their parents having sex, especially with each other. It wasn’t just adults that kept alive the myth of a stork bringing babies.

Billie’s blue eyes flashed. “You mark my words! He’ll be dead in a year.”

“Then you don’t have to worry. Let him learn the hard way. If he can’t keep up, she’ll leave him.”

Billie’s eyes snapped again. “I can sure tell you’ve never had a man of your own. Wedding vows are forever.”

“Not unless both people still mean them.”

Billie set her teacup down. “Are you going to sass me in my own home?”

“I’m sorry, Mama. I can see this isn’t going to work. I can get a room in the motel.”

“It’s full of wedding guests! The bride’s family is in town. They must have called them down out of the hills! Some of those people act like they’ve never seen two houses pushed together before! And a stop light! They must think that the town put up Christmas decorations just for them!”

“Oh, I’m sure you’re exaggerating, Mama.”

“There’s Rykers out of Carolina! And Monroes out of West Virginia! What does that tell you?! Damn moonshiners! There’ll be dead dogs in the streets! And bastard babies all over town around Christmas!”

“If her people are away from here, why are they getting married here, anyway?”
“To taunt me!”

“Mama. I doubt that. But it does seem odd. Generally, they go to the bride’s home church.”

“I’m sure I don’t know, nor do I care to know. Damn heathens, probably don’t go to church! They probably have to bury their dead by the dark of the moon in unconsecrated ground! Probably none of them have ever gotten ‘hitched’ unless the circuit rider makes it back into their holler!”

“Mama, don’t be so bitter.”

“How else am I supposed to be?! My husband’s getting married!”

“Mama,” Jessie said gently, “he isn’t your husband anymore.”

Billie’s eyes narrowed. “You always did have a hateful streak in you. Just like Wayne.”

Silence crashed around them as they fumed.

“All right, Mama. We got it all said. Now we can settle down and visit. How’s Aunt Kay and her family?”

Billie answered stiffly and with halting words. Her kid sister Kay lived on a farm north of town and had a good marriage. By the time Billie and Jessie needed to prepare supper, they were able to work together and talk in normal tones. But there was no warmth or cordiality between them. There never had been, so why should now be any different?

Jessie lay in her makeshift bed and stared at the unfamiliar ceiling. Instead of feeling cozy in the tiny room, she felt cramped and confined. Mama never had been one to make a home homey. Even when the three of them had lived in the two-story frame house where Jessie had grown up, it was just three people living together. Mama’s only concession to domesticity was sewing and fancywork. Doilies lay everywhere around the trailer, just as they had in Jessie’s childhood home. Billie still couldn’t cook very well, either, so that evening’s greasy supper of hamburgers and fried cabbage lay heavily on Jessie’s stomach.

Jessie thought of the Culpeppers singing group and wondered if they were missing her. She was surprised to think of how foreign her life with them seemed now. It had only been two days when she’d last seen them. She thought of her sometime lover Luke and wondered if he missed her. Probably not. And Chad, the manager? Did he miss her? Did she really care?

And Jessie thought of her father and the woman who was to become her stepmother. Would there be a strain between the two women? As far as Jessie could learn, Bonita was halfway between Jessie’s age and Wayne’s age. Bonita had a son who was a third-grader. That made him about Davy’s age. Jessie realized with a jolt that she could have half-siblings presented to her when she should be having children of her own.

She supposed she was concerned because her father would be moving further away from her life. With a remarriage, the possibility of Wayne and Billie getting back together would be nil. Jessie had always hoped for a reconciliation. There hadn’t ever been much of a sense of family between the three of them, but there had been something. Now there would be nothing. And something, no matter how slim, had always definitely been better than nothing.
The next morning, the two women shared a quiet, calorie-rich breakfast of butter cream doughnuts and chocolate cruellers. When Billie snapped on her television to watch her morning quiz shows, Jessie mumbled an excuse and slipped out the front door.

It was like a reprieve. The day was bright with a hint of early spring. Jessie breathed deeply of the tingling air, wrapped her jacket more about her, and stepped into the street. She could’ve borrowed her mother’s compact car, but she wanted to walk around town for awhile. Driving went too fast and Jessie wanted to savor her surroundings.

She thought she saw a curtain drop in the front window of the house across the street, then forgot it and hurried on. Small town people are always curious. She’d have to ask Billie who lived there.

This hadn’t been the neighborhood where she’d grown up, but her childhood home lay only five blocks away. Clinton was a small town and she knew where everyone lived. Or used to live. As she passed a house with children playing in front of it, she remembered with a pang that a nice old couple had once lived there. The old people were either in a rest home or dead by now, and she hadn’t known of their passing. So much history had taken place in Clinton in ten years, and she had missed it.

The houses looked the same, but were different, too. A garage had been added to that Colonial on the corner, and a fence removed from the Simpson’s front yard. Paint colors had changed and trees had grown. All except for the Mitchell’s scarlet maple, and it was gone all together. Probably a victim of the wind storm three years ago.

The town was the same and yet had changed. She wondered if she could look at her childhood home without getting weepy? She’d heard that a high school history teacher and his large brood had moved in.

“Walking around with your head in the clouds again, Jessie?”

She squinted up into the face of the man before her, and a name came, almost unbidden, to her lips. “Sam? Sam Benedict?” She studied the blue eyes and blonde hair. This man was stockier and more careworn than the high school classmate she remembered, but there was something in the twinkling eyes that told her it was her old friend. “My God, it is you!”

“Afraid so.” His face looked tired and familiar. A wistful smile curved his lips, but it seemed to take a lot of effort from him. He was about her age and looked as jaded as she felt.

Jessie thought of an old, abused house shoe as she studied Sam’s face and tried to find traces of the high school football hero she’d once worshipped. His handsome features were muted with pain and age, but were more interesting than the privileged smirch and disdainful snarl of the arrogant boy he’d once been.

“Understand your father’s getting married, Jess. Thought you might show up for the festivities.”

“Yes. I had to come back to support my daddy.“

“I always liked Wayne.“

“Most people did.“ She tilted her head and studied him. “I thought I might meet up with some of my former classmates, but seeing you here is amazing. I thought you’d be long gone from Clinton by now.”
His smile deepened, but was still more wistful than humorous. “Me, too.”

His martyred pain was almost physical, and she could feel it. “Oh, Sam, what happened?” she asked softly. “Don’t answer that. I have no right. Forget I said it.”

“Old friends have rights, Jessie. It seems like the last ten years haven’t passed, and you’re asking me why I missed Mike Benton’s pass to win the game against Auburn.”

Jessie smiled, really smiled, at that. But Sam’s smile was still wistful.

“I guess Life hasn’t been too kind to me, Jessie. Reckon you know what that’s like, too. No disrespect, honey, but you look like you’ve been through a wringer. Guess we’ve both been battered around pretty good.”

Jessie could only nod.

“I’ve seen you on television, singing with the Culpeppers. You made it out of Clinton, but not as much as you’d intended, or as far. Otherwise, your eyes wouldn’t look so haunted.”

Tears sparkled in her eyes as she looked up at him. “Did I ask for this much honesty from you, Sam Benedict? Just a simple ‘Hello’ would’ve done. But, no, you have to make me feel like I’m coming home to a funeral, not a wedding. I should make you eat a football.”

Sam threw his head back and roared with laughter. “That’s just what you told me after the Auburn game. You said that if I couldn’t get a touchdown with the football, I might as well eat it.”

“At least you would’ve found some use for it.” She felt better since she heard him laugh, and that broke the tension around them.

He gathered her into his arms and rolled her from side to side in an exaggerated bear hug. She was amazed how comfortable she felt there in his arms.

“Oh, Jessie, Jessie, I’m glad you’re home. I’ve missed you, little friend.”

Her limbs were heavy, as if she could sink against his chest and be contended to be enveloped in numbing slumber for days.

“How long has it been, Jess?”

“Ages.”

“You didn’t come back for the high school reunion last spring.”

She turned her head away from his chest and gazed at a nearby tree trunk.

“I couldn’t stand to see my former classmates happy when I didn’t have anything myself to brag about.”

He stopped rocking her and pushed her at arm’s length. His eyes twinkled down at her. “And they were all so envious of you.”

“Of me?” She pulled out of his arms. “But I have nothing.”

“That’s what everyone thinks, Babe. That’s why high school reunions are so frustrating. We remember our dreams and realize we’re not accomplishing what we intended. We know that time is passing us by, but we’re busy with new interests. Then up comes a reunion, and we feel guilty.”
“Is that what just happened? A reunion of two guilty people?”

The wistful smile was back. “I think so.” He nodded around him. “Taking an early morning walk to relocate your childhood?”

At last she could grin, too. “Something like that. And I was feeling pretty melancholy about how things had changed, and then you came along and really made me feel blue.”

“Sorry. Sometimes I do that to people.”

She looked, really looked, at him. He’d put on weight, flabby weight, and looked all in. And he was wearing a uniform.

“Are you a policeman now?”

“Night watch. I was just going home when I saw you.”

“Do you work every night?”

“We rotate. Someday, I’m going to get a real job. This rotation business isn’t for older guys.”

“And it’s got to be terrible for home life. A wife would hate it. I mean, you and Kathy are still married, Aren’t you?”

“No. Not for a long time now.”

“I’m sorry, Sam. I shouldn’t have asked.”

“Why not? It’s public knowledge.”

“I know. But it makes you remember.”

“Seems like you are going to have more trouble than me with remembering. This trip home will really stir you up.”

Her eyes flicked up with unguarded fear. “Damn you, Sam. I didn’t need to hear that.”

His wistful smile deepened. “That’s what friends are for, too, Babe.”

That evening, Jessie borrowed her mother’s compact car and drove to the VFW club at the edge of town. She’d worn her second-best outfit of red-plaid blouse and denim skirt because this was the night she’d meet her new relatives.

Billie had been seething, but had held her tongue. She wanted Jessie to take her side against Wayne, but knew that would never happen. Jessie had always been a daddy’s girl. Besides, it might be better if Jessie saw for herself how much of a fool her daddy was being.

The parking lot was nearly full, and the club was noisy and smoky when Jessie arrived. A quiet place probably would’ve been nicer for a first meeting with her new stepmother, but Jessie felt that Wayne and Bonita were as nervous as she was. Better to meet where there were plenty of distractions than somewhere where they would have nobody but each other for company.

Jessie saw a sea of heads in the dim room, and than a hand shot up to wave at her. She waved back, smiled, and wove toward her father. He met her half-way and swept her into a mighty hug.
He was still the Wayne that she remembered. Brown, wavy hair like hers and crystal blue eyes, again like hers.

“Hi, honey.” He seemed almost apprehensively.

“Hi, Daddy,” she said as warmly as she could. “No time, no see, you old codger.”

He threw his head back with a laugh, and all was well between them. Neither could hold a grudge. That was Billie’s specialty.

“I don’t get around Nashville much,” he said as he squeezed her hand.

“And I don’t leave there much.”

They studied each other with a mutual respect for each others' lives, but nonetheless saddened that time and distance separated them.

“I’ve missed you, baby.”

“I’ve missed you, too, Daddy.”

“Come on, honey. I’ll introduce you to Bonita.”

“All right.” Now that his arm was around her waist, Jessie felt no worry. His apprehension seemed to have melted, too.

“Bonita, honey, this is my daughter Jessie.”

A short woman with a round face punctuated with twin dimples looked up. She was smiling with genuine interest in her green eyes. She took Jessie’s hand and pulled her forward.

“Jessie. At last! Do sit down and let’s get acquainted. Wayne, go find yourself something to do. We girls want to talk.”

Wayne looked so hapless that the two women laughed at him.

“Guess I know where I stand,” he mumbled. “Hey, Jake! You guys hear what happened down in The Hollows last night?” He moved toward the bar.

Bonita grinned after him. “He’ll be busy for hours. We can get acquainted without him around.”

Jessie’s heart sank.

Bonita ground out her cigarette. “Wayne assures me that you’re not a thing like your mother. I just want to tell you, Jessie, that I love him and I’ll do good by him. If we should fall out of love, it’ll be because of us and not because of you or my son. I’m not exactly modern. This marriage will be between Wayne and me. You’ll always be welcome as long as you abide by that one rule.”

Some unknown pressure released its hold on Jessie, and she smiled. She and Bonita could be friends. THE MARRIAGE would not be the fragile, all-consuming master of them all. They could act naturally.

“Now I’m just so proud that I’m getting a step-daughter who’s as pretty and well-known as you are. I want to hear all your hopes and ambitions, because I intend to bore you with mine.” She joined Jessie in a laugh.
When Wayne returned to the table, he found Bonita and Jessie talking, laughing, and drinking their third beers. He called for another round, joined the girls, and demanded to know what was so funny. The party lasted well into the night.

Later, trying to relax in bed so sleep could claim her, Jessie thought back over the evening with Wayne and Bonita. She tried to call up some envy of Bonita who now had most of Wayne’s attention, but Jessie just couldn’t manage a decent hatred. She’d been away from her father for years. But before that, when she’d been a child, she’d never been really close to her folks. She’d shared a harmony with Wayne, but never a companionship. Wayne was from the old school of philosophy that thought the mothers raised the children and the fathers supported the family. Wayne had supported them, but stayed away more and more as Billie’s behavior had become more shrewish. When she became a waitress to ease her boredom, it was the final blow to his manhood. He thought she was questioning his ability to support them.

Jessie wondered how Wayne handled the fact that Bonita worked as a nurse. Perhaps Wayne had modernized, and a working wife didn’t threaten him anymore. Whatever, Wayne and Bonita would work it out together, alone. Bonita had made it very clear to Jessie that she would tolerate no interference. That was fine and dandy with Jessie, just as long as Bonita didn’t interfere with her life. Strong fences make good neighbors, Jessie thought. Tit for tat.

She went to sleep thinking of trite expressions.

The day of the wedding was bright and sunny. Jessie wore a light blue cotton dress with eyelet trim. Her western-flavored outfit fit right in since the ceremony was to be held in the city park with the reception at the VFW. The emphasis was to be on relaxation and informality. Wayne and Bonita were mainly concerned with their guests having a good time, and they did.

Someone handed Jessie a guitar and the noise abated in the VFW. She didn’t mind being asked to sing. It was for her daddy and his friends.

Jessie strummed the guitar, and her audience looked at her in expectation. “You might have heard me singing this song when you’re down in Nashville. It’s a little song called ‘The Moon Envied Us,’ and it goes something like this:

“My sweetheart and I
Watched the river at night,
The earth shared our joy
At finding true love.
The moon in her flight
Bathed us in her pure light,
But envied the bliss we knew.
She took him from me
And left me alone.

“My tears fell to earth
And roses burst into bloom,
A sigh left my lips
And created the breeze.
I called out his name
And quickly he came
He’s mortal the same as me.
Now the moon sails alone
On her endless path.”

Applause filled the room as Wayne kissed her cheek. “You sure know how to throw cold water on a party, Baby.”

But she could tell he was proud of her.

“Come on, guys! Let’s hear some foot-stomping! Play some blue grass!”

Someone punched a button on the jukebox, and the sounds of sawing fiddles filled the air. Wayne gave Jessie a wink, and then went to find Bonita.

“I thought your song was awfully nice, Jessie. It gave us a change of pace and a chance to rest.”

Jessie took a sip of her beer. “Thanks, Shelly.” She looked down at her petite cousin. “You always were my number one fan.”

“And you still sound like Emmy Lou Harris. But more than that, you’ve done something with your talent. You had the nerve to leave this town.”

Jessie looked, really looked, at Shelly. She had the same wiry brown, naturally curly hair as Jessie, but hers was cut short as a concession to being a matron now. Her figure was as trim as ever, and her face as flawless. But on second glance, Jessie could see the stress lines gripping the skin around the crystal blue eyes. And her voice was strained with tension.

“Sometimes it takes more nerve to stay.”

Shelly looked down. “You’ve heard about my trouble with Brian.”

“Beau met my plane at Jackson. It’s a long drive back to Clinton.”

Shelly sighed, rolled her eyes, and pulled her face down. “Brothers!”

“He loves you and he’s worried about you. He doesn’t know how to help. Neither do I.”

“I know.” Her voice echoed a whinny tone. “I’m the only one who can do anything about it. But we’ve got the twins and a certain amount of respect. I can’t jeopardize my or his standing in the community. But I know people are talking. Brian just laughs at the gossip. But I know where there’s smoke, there’s fire. He has to be seeing some of those women.”

“I’m sorry, Shelly.”

“He abuses his marriage vows as much as the principles he learned in law school. I know that he and his uncle Buck are doing shady things in real estate. But Brian’s smart enough to appear ethical. That’s how he got to be prosecuting attorney for this county. He’s even got a law office in Memphis now. I think he’ll eventually move there so that all the people in Memphis will learn how smart he is.”

“Will you move there with him?”

Shelly bit her lips together and tears sprang into her eyes. “If he lets me.”

Jessie suppressed an urge to shake some backbone into her cousin. No wonder Beau was so frustrated with her.
“And I think he’s found a way to make enough of a name for himself to leave Clinton in a blaze of glory so he’ll be noticed in Memphis.”

“What’s that?”
“I really shouldn’t say, but Brian likes to brag about it. Trouble is, he’s going to step on some prominent toes around here and make enemies. He’s had threats from disgruntled clients and people who’ve lost law suits against him before, but nothing like this has ever happened. He carries a gun around and lets people know about it.”

Jessie wanted to scream at Shelly to make her get on with the story, but she knew any push would make the tender-hearted woman not say another word. Jessie had to let Shelly talk in her own time.

Shelly watched as she shifted her soft drink around on the paper doily on the table top.

“A few months ago there was a terrible car accident, and some people from Alabama were killed. Witnesses said the car was forced off the road by another car that disappeared into the night. Theory has it that the car belonged to Len Tallant’s teenage boy.”

“Len Tallant?”
“That’s right. One of the Untouchables, and so is his son. But Randy is quite a drinker and runs with a drinking crowd. The other boys in his car come from prominent families, too. Brian suspects an elaborate cover-up and is going to call a grand jury to hear evidence. The state police may have to come in and declare martial law if things get as out of hand as I fear. This involves too many prominent families. The lid may blow off this town. And Brian just laughs about it and dares them to try something against him. He could get hurt.”

“Do you still love him?”
Shelly frowned. “I fear for him. But, no, I don’t love him. He has no respect for me and treats me like a child who can’t fight back. That kind of treatment kills love. But he’s my children’s father. And a human being. He’s being too foolhardy. But then, there are times when he talks down to me and I wish him dead. I know it’s wrong, Jess, but I could raise a gun up to his head and pull the trigger without any qualms.”

Jessie was stunned with the intensity of Shelly’s emotion. For someone as docile as Shelly to resort to murder would take a tremendous amount of hatred. And the hatred seemed to be there.

“Shelly, you have to get away from him.”
A tear slid down Shelly’s face. “I know.”

“Don’t let him turn you into something evil. You can’t lose your self-respect.”

“It’s difficult--” Her body stiffened. “Brian.”

Jessie followed Shelly’s eyes and saw a tall, good-looking man working his way through the crowd. He was obviously popular with this gathering, if hardy back slaps and vigorous hand shakes were any criteria. A wide smile dominated his handsome face as he waved and hollered at someone.

“Hi, Babe.” He bent and hugged Shelly before dropping into a chair beside her. Jessie saw Shelly cringe and realized Brian was trying to give the impression that all was well between them.
“Having fun with your family, Hon?”

“Yeah,” Shelly whispered.

Brian turned his smile on Jessie. “Well, Jessie. And how have you been?”

“Just fine, Brian. And you?”

“Never better! Especially when I’ve got my best gal by my side.” He acted as if he was going to hug Shelly again, but glanced at her stoniness and thought better of it. “Glad you two are having such a good chat. Maybe Shelly will be able to relax and enjoy herself more.”

Jessie saw Shelly’s body jerk. Brian sounded as if Shelly was having some problem he couldn’t understand, but was deeply concerned about.

“Has she shown you a picture of the boys yet?” he asked jovially.

“No.”

Brian looked at Shelly with a frown of concern, and then turned to Jessie with a bright smile as if he were covering up his wife’s poor behavior. “Those two sure are ornery little scamps! I’ve been trying to convince Shelly that they need little brothers and little sisters, but she hasn’t been too receptive to me yet. But, I’ll give her time.” He turned a patient, all-forgiving face to Shelly.

A flush of anger tinged Shelly’s face. Nothing she could say would help her case. She’d learned long ago not to argue with Brian. He was a clever attorney and could use the English language to win any point he chose to make.

He turned to Jessie. “That was a haunting ballad you were singing, Jessie. It sounded familiar. Have you ever recorded it?”

Jessie smiled. “Hardly. It’s a parody more than a song.”

“Really?” Brian inhaled his freshly lit cigarette. “What’s it a parody of?”

“The theme song on Tallahassee Twister.”

“That syrupy thing that Miles Paxton Hughes sings at the start of his television series?” Brian smirked. “I shouldn’t criticize, though. It’s probably making him a mint of money. And puts all the women in the mood, too, I understand.”

“That’s the scuttlebutt.”

“I better try it at home.” He glanced at Shelly. “On second thought—” He frowned and ground out his cigarette as if he couldn’t quite figure out what to do with his problem wife.

What an actor! Jessie thought. She caught Shelly’s eyes wild with frantic denial. Jessie tried to convey to the beleaguer wife that she wasn’t fooled by Brian’s performance.

“On second thought, you better be careful where you sing your parody. Song writers are thin-skinned and sue wildly. You may need a good lawyer.”

“Would you be available?”

He answered her uplifted brow with his own uplifted brow. The bastard! Flirting with someone in front of his wife. And the someone was his wife’s own cousin, to boot.
“I give discounts to family members,” he murmured, implying he would give other concessions, too. “Drop into the office sometime, and we’ll talk about it.”

“I won’t be in town that long, Brian.”

“That’s too bad. Having a client as famous as you’re becoming would be profitable, for both of us. Just remember me if you’re ever in the market for--” He winked at her. “--professional help,” he finished.

Shelly shifted nervously and Jessie would’ve gagged on her beer if she’d been swallowing. One thing was for certain. If she was ever in trouble, she’d want Brian on her side. He’d make a ruthless enemy.

“Well, dear,” he said pleasantly to Shelly. “If you’re ready to go, I can drop you off at home. That way, you won’t have to wait for Beau.”

“All right,” she mumbled.

He started to pull out her chair when someone called him aside. Shelly had time to lean toward Jessie and whisper in her ear.

“He’s spying on me! I didn’t even know he was going to be here. And he heard your song, so he’s been here awhile.”

“Why is he spying on you?”

“He wants me under his thumb!” she hissed.

“Does he think you’re seeing someone?”

A puddle of sudden tears appeared in her eyes.

“Are you?” Jessie insisted.

“No,” Shelly whispered.

“Would you, ah, like to be?”

A tear rolled down her face.

“Someone in particular?”

Shelly caught her breath and another tear rolled down her face.

Then Jessie realized that Shelly wasn’t looking into space, but at someone. She turned in time to see a man at the bar present his back to them. Jessie recognized the man as Shelly’s high school sweetheart.

“Well, here I am back again, Babe,” Brian announced. “Sorry to get pulled away like that. A lawyer’s work is never done,” he said pleasantly to Jessie. “In fact, I have to go back to the office after I take Shelly home.”

Jessie saw Shelly’s back stiffen.

“Nice seeing you again, Jessie,” Brian continued. “Remember my offer to help. Family has to stick together, you know.”
Jessie’s smile felt tight with hypocrisy. “I will, Brian. Bye, Shelly.”


A wave of frustrated anger washed over Jessie. Now she understood how Beau felt.

“Brian said it, Shelly,” Jessie prompted. “Family sticks together.”

Tension eased in Shelly’s eyes, and Brian looked wary. Jessie cocked an eyebrow at him, and he led Shelly away with true puzzlement on his face. Careful, Jessie thought. You don’t want him for an enemy, remember? And bringing his true nature out in the open wouldn’t help Shelly.

Not too long afterward, Jessie left the wedding reception, too. She’d congratulated Wayne and Bonita, knowing it’d be a long time before she saw her father again. He’d live with his new family in Chattanooga. Fresh marriage, fresh start, he’d said. Jessie felt no sadness. She wished them well.

Stepping into the bright afternoon sunshine, she saw a patrol car sitting near the curb. Jessie walked over to it and glanced inside.

“Afternoon, Sam. You on days now?”

Sam squinted up at her. “Yep. This is where the action is today. I want to be visible in case the party goes getting too frisky, and some of the party goers want to tear out of town a little faster than they should.”

“You’ve been there awhile, haven’t you?”

“I cruise around, but, yeah, I’ve mostly been here for a couple of hours now. Soon, it’ll be time for the kids to start dragging Main Street.”

“You’ve got a long night ahead of you. Why don’t you get out of that car and stretch a little while you’ve got the chance?”

“Sounds like a good idea.” He pulled himself out and stretched. “A body gets kinked up without knowing it.” He nodded at the VFW. “Must be quite a shindig in there.”

“Mostly family.”

“That would be half of the county.”

Jessie grinned. “Yeah, and I never knew I’d miss kinfolk until I was somewhere where I didn’t have any.”

“Pretty melancholy time for you, ain’t it?”

“Oh, it’s partly the wedding, but I’ve been restless for quite awhile now. And I don’t know why.”

“I still say those class reunions cause more trouble than good. But you’re not the only one who’s upset. I saw Brian and Shelly Conyers leaving a few minutes ago. And Shelly didn’t look very happy. Brian gave me a big wave, though. Acted like he was king of the planet, or something.”

“Shelly is unhappy. I always wondered how a relationship between them could last. Brian’s so dynamic and Shelly’s pretty quiet.”
“Yeah, and he doesn’t treat her very nice. Everybody talks about his flings with other women. Shelly’s bound to hear some of that gossip.”

“She has. Brian’s brazen in other ways, too. He’s good in the courtroom and he knows it. He’s made some powerful enemies and he’s preparing to make some more, I hear.” She watched Sam carefully. “Understand he’s going to call a grand jury to investigate a fatal traffic accident that happened around here.”

Sam breathed deeply. “Brian seems to think there’s been some sort of cover-up. The police sure as hell don’t know anything about it, but it sure would explain a lot. As far as I’m concerned, I’d like to see some of those smart-ass kids get busted for drunk driving.”

“I’d probably stir up a lot of trouble for the town.”

“Sometimes a place needs some stirring up.” He squinted down the street. “Looks like the kids are hitting the streets early tonight. I’ll see you around, Jessie.”

“Bye, Sam.” She watched him drive away, and then went home.

“Well, did you get the two love birds married off?” Billie wanted to know as soon as Jessie cleared the door. Billie sat in a kimono in front of her television. A polka party show was blaring loudly at her.

“Yes,” Jessie answered as she dropped into a chair. Then, to change the subject, she said, “I talked to Sam Benedict awhile, too.”

Billie hooted. “That lazy excuse of a man?! It’s a wonder he found the energy to hold up his end of the conversation.”

“Oh, Sam’s okay. Oh, Brian Conyers is calling a grand jury to investigate a fatal traffic accident.”

“Brian has to get outside help because Clinton’s police are too lazy to get off their fat asses and work.”

Jessie didn’t answer, and Billie went back to her television show. Billie made rash statements, but Jessie wondered if her mother’s assessment of this situation wasn’t true. Sam Benedict hadn’t exactly burned himself out in school. Jessie doubted if he’d changed much. Still, he was working now. Surely that took some effort from him.

That evening in her tiny bedroom, Jessie realized she was homesick for the Culpeppers, the group she sang with. She popped a tape of their songs in her cassette player and lost herself in their music. She remembered when each of the songs had been taped and felt nostalgic with her memories.

The tape finished and Jessie stared into space. The songs did much to unsettle her. Nearly a week had passed since she’d arrived home, and her unease was increasing. She didn’t know if it was caused by being away from the Culpeppers for a week or having to return to them in three weeks.

Her mother was being little help to Jessie. Billie was too deeply concerned with her own affairs to hear about Jessie’s worries. Jessie thought Billie should be horribly depressed with her monotone existence, but Billie didn’t seem to mind it.

Jessie had always gone to relatives when she needed to talk to someone. Beau and Shelly seemed bogged down with Shelly’s problems, so Jessie thought she’d drive out to the farm where her Aunt
Kay lived. Kay was Billie’s kid sister and her exact opposite. Whereas Billie was self-centered, Kay was open and loving. Kay always made Jessie feel good. She’d have to visit her aunt soon.

Then, the next morning, Brian Conyers dropped his bombshell. Or both of his bombshells. Indictments naming sons of some of the most prominent families in town were served. The boys were charged with motor vehicular homicide. Brian hadn’t waited for a grand jury. That was merely a ruse to lure people into thinking they had more time to stall an investigation. Brian had gathered his evidence and affidavits without suspicion as the town waited for a grand jury to convene. People who didn’t hate him and even his enemies had to admit that Brian was cunning.

But they wondered if he’d bitten off more than he could chew. Taking on so many powerful people should’ve occupied his whole spring, but Brian had another surprise in store for the town. That morning, he also filed for divorce from Shelly and named her old high school sweetheart as correspondent.

Shelly was in tears and wringing her hands when Jessie visited her.

“Dick and I have done nothing wrong, Jessie. We haven’t worked up the nerve.”

“Apparently Brian is reading a lot into looks across a crowded room, as the song goes. Yes,” she answered Shelly’s quick glance. “I saw Dick the day of Dad’s wedding.”

“I don’t know what Brian’s thinking. He must be getting tired of Clinton and planning to leave here in a blaze of glory.”

Later that day Jessie ran into Brian, and he did seem rather satisfied with himself.

“Hello, Jessie. Planning on coming to my office?”

She wished she could wipe the smirk off his face. No wonder Shelly would like to kill him.

Without answering, she turned and walked away from him.

“You let me know, Jessie.”

She could hear the laughter in his voice.

“It’s not right the way he’s acting.”

“W-what?” She tried to concentrate on the bitter, old man whose eyes blazed with anger. He hadn’t been there a moment before, but now he was in Jessie’s path.

“Brian shouldn’t be using his power so ruthlessly. He can’t step on people for his own gain. Sure, some of those kids are guilty. But he’s going to smear a whole bunch of innocent kids getting to them. I taught him better than that. I taught him ideals count.”

Jessie left the man to his misery. She’d finally recognized Brian’s former Scout master, the man who’d helped Brian become an Eagle Scout.

“How you doing, Bonnie Girl?” Jessie greeted as she bent to pat the willing head of the old collie. The dog wagged her tail and proudly lead her guest to the farmhouse.

“Jessie! Oh, how nice! Come in! Come in!” Pleasure plainly shown on the face of the middle-aged woman as she picked at her tousled blonde hair and smoothed down her red-checked shirt and dirty
blue jeans. “You must forgive my appearance. I’ve been messing around in the shed, seeing if any of my garden implements have found their way down to the barn over the winter. My men are a bunch of pack rats! And I have to get ready for spring. Won’t be long now until I can be out in the garden planting my vegetables again.”

“You look fine to me, Aunt Kay.”

Kay held her at arms’ length. “And you look fine to me, too, girl. Maybe a good rest and a little Southern sunshine would help, though. Or maybe your mama’s already told you that.”

“Countless times.”

“Then you don’t need to hear it from me. What I will give you is a big hug, though.”

“Thanks, Aunt Kay.”

“The boys won’t let me hug them anymore. Not manly, they say. Sit down. Sit down. Oh, they are going to hate that they missed seeing you. Arnold, too. Can you stay for supper?”

“Afraid not. Where are they, anyway?”

“Out pricing seed corn. They can’t wait for spring work to open up, either.”

“Bonnie Girl still knew me. I’m surprised she’s still around.”

“She must be fifteen, if she’s a day. We got her when Ryan was eight and Clint was three. We probably won’t get to keep her very much longer. She’ll be leaving about the time the boys will.” She shook herself out of her melancholy. “That’s enough of an old woman’s problems that haven’t come up yet. How’s your mama today? Thought she might be with you. Is she over your daddy’s marriage yet?”

“She’s prostrate, Aunt Kay. I can’t get her off the living room couch.”

“I bet she’s eating her head off, too, isn’t she? She’ll be having to go back on Weight Watchers again. She always thought it was her weight that drove Wayne away, and I always told her, ‘Hell, Billie, it’s that constant carping about the damn weight that he can’t stand. Shut up and just be cuddly. That’s what he liked about you in the first place.’ But what are kid sisters supposed to know?”

“You still have Uncle Arnold.”

“I don’t eat my head off, either. Of course, and I mean this in the nicest way possible, you understand, because Wayne being your daddy and all, Arnold wouldn’t look at another woman. He might be an old stick-in-the-mud, but I can trust him. Your daddy’s always been too charming for his own good. His and anybody who thinks she can hold him. You mark my words, Bonita may have troubles with that guy. But tell me about yourself. My, I’ve been proud to see you on TV. Are you satisfied with your career?”

“How did you know what was on my mind?”

“It was either man trouble or career problems. And I hadn’t seen you with any strangers.”

“I’m at a crossroads, Aunt Kay.”

“Maybe you’ve got a seven-year itch.”
“Same difference, I guess. I came home for Daddy’s wedding and found I’ve been left behind by people my own age. Some have growing families, some went through college, and some have promising careers. When I got out of high school, all I wanted to do was sing.”

“You’re lucky you got to do what you wanted.”

“But now I feel like I’m missing something. You went to college once. Are you sorry that you never used that education? Have you ever felt like I do? Was it different for your generation?”

“Sure, I had big plans back then,” Kay said with a quick laugh. “That was just before Vietnam and the hippies busted out on us. I remember listening to Peter, Paul, and Mary and Joan Baez. It was great to be young then. I was going to be a social worker and maybe join the Peace Corps after I’d straightened out a few ghettos back here in the States first. I was about as idealistic as you could get.

“Then the summer of my sophomore year I ran into Arnold at the county fair and everything clicked. In high school I never thought twice about the farm boys. They were clods who wore dirty flight boots. Couldn’t get ten words out of them. And if they finally did bust loose and say something, it was all talk about tractors and cattle and country-western music. What did I want with someone like that?

“But that summer night when I saw Arnold again-- Well, let me tell you, I’d never had such a time! Cotton candy, Ferris wheel rides, canned fruit exhibits. Talk about corny! But it was real. Suddenly, it seemed more real and down-to-earth and honest than anything I’d ever known. The high-flown ideals I’d been studying down at State seemed just that: high-flown. I wanted, I NEEDED, something basic, something as honest as the rural farming society that’d built our country. Maybe I was just seeing it through Arnold’s eyes. Maybe it was stardust. But whatever it was, I never went back to State.”

“Have you ever regretted that?”

“Sometimes. What am I saying? Regret Arnold and the boys? Never. But sometimes, Jessie, I wonder. I wonder what I would’ve accomplished if I’d pursued a career. But that doubt didn’t come for a long time. Not until the boys were grown and I watched them seeking their own dreams. And then I realized that was it. I’d let the dream slip away. I never even regretted it at the time. Now I feel the stirrings again of that young college girl. It’s strange. I go through menopause and I want to go back to being that twenty-year-old girl again. I want to start over. But I can’t. I made my choice. And it was a good choice. The sorrow isn’t that I didn’t find out if I could succeed, but that I lost the dream. If I could tell you anything, Jessie, it’s to find a dream. Then realize it.”

“That’s the problem, Aunt Kay. I thought my dream was singing, but that seems to have run out. I feel lost.”

“But maybe it’s a blessing, Jessie. Had you ever considered that?”

“I don’t understand.”

“You got a second chance to find your dream, girl. Not many folks are that lucky. Look at this crossroads as an opportunity. Listen with your heart. You’re meant for something else.”

Jessie was thoughtful after visiting with her Aunt Kay. She sat in her mother’s living room and let Billie’s tirade boil around her head.

“What? What did you say?”
“I said, I hope you’re putting gasoline in my car.”

Jessie sighed. “Yes, Mama, I am.”

“Where’d you say you went? Out to Kay’s? Bet she was gloating about Wayne getting remarried.”

“No, Mama, she wasn’t. And you should go visit Aunt Kay. It would do you good to get out in the country air.”

“And catch my death of hay fever.” Billie sniffed.

“Oh, Mama, you get hay fever in the fall. Spring would be wonderful for you.”

Billie sniffed again. “Fat lot you care.” She opened her mouth to start another tirade.

“Oh, look, Mama, that man on television is going to win that car.”

“Hot damn! Wonder if the old fart would want to share with a good looking, middle aged blonde?!”

Billie got lost to the program, and Jessie sighed. How much longer could she stand this visit home?

The next day Jessie borrowed her mama’s car again to drive out into the country. As she crawled into the compact, she saw the curtain drop in the window across the street. She smiled. Mama had told her about that situation.

The people across the street had lived in that house for three generations. Now they were down to a widow lady and her old maid daughter. Jessie even recognized the names. The daughter had even babysat her, but Jessie remembered the woman as a humorless prig who never budged from prejudiced viewpoints. She was the last woman who should have babysat a child. Jessie had never liked that woman. Hell, there hadn’t been anything to like. Children naturally love anyone who meets them at least halfway. That woman had never made an effort.

And now the old maid had nothing to do but obey her tyrannical, aged mother. The daughter had no life of her own, so she spied on other people’s through the lace curtains at the parlor windows.

As Jessie drove off, she tried to feel sorry for the recluse, but couldn’t.

Across the street, the woman adjusted the lace curtain with satisfaction. How clever for her to watch people from secret places. She felt like she was being a proper detective, just like ones in the mystery novels she read. Mother disapproved of most activities for her, but reading seemed to be all right. Probably because Mother had once been a school teacher and wanted her daughter to improve herself.

Mother didn’t know of all of her other activities, though. There had been that nice delivery boy from the grocery store. When had that been, now? Thirty-five years?! Surely not! He’d been such a nice boy, though, and she’d allowed him to kiss her cheek once when he’d made a delivery out on the back stoop. But he wouldn’t have been a proper match for her. Oh, no. Oh, never. Not her with her elite name.

And the traveling salesman from Fuller Brush hadn’t been proper, either. He’d sighed so ardently every time he visited during that five years, but then he changed his territory. She never saw him again, but that was all right. He hadn’t been proper for her.
But the longings were in her. She could’ve been such a loving wife and mother. She’d watched other families, but she knew they thought her harsh and cold.

Standing in the bathroom or hallway, she would discover she’d begun to utter the words without realizing it. Glancing into the mirror, almost self-consciously, she’d hear herself say, “I love you. I’ve always loved you. I always will.” Who? Who did she love? She didn’t mean herself. It was someone else, someone she’d never know. Perhaps it was the man she’d never marry or the child she’d never bear. She ached to share the love in her being and knew she never would.

It was at times like this, with the strange words that seemed forever on the tip of her tongue and were now echoing into the quiet, that she’d smile. Pessimistic, indeed! How could she claim to be pessimistic with those silly, romantic words rattling around in her brain?

Not that many other people in town considered her to be a romantic. Not many people in town considered her to be much of anything. Statistically speaking, she was a middle-aged virgin still living in the house where she’d grown up. Her parents, while growing weaker physically, were becoming more demanding of her time. What else could she possibly desire than to wait on them? Good Christian children helped their aging parents. What they conveniently forgot was that they’d quickly washed their hands of their own parents in similar circumstances. But she hadn’t forgotten. It hadn’t been that long ago.

She tried to stay independent. She and half a dozen other women had attended the same Sunday school class since childhood. But these women were long married, some now with grandchildren. Sometimes it ground on her nerves to hear about those grandchildren.

She held occasional jobs, mostly babysitting. But the children seemed so bossy and demanding now. Once she could’ve had better work. She’d been good with figures and typing in high school. There’d been talk of a scholarship to a business college. But when that fell through, it’d been easier to stay home that autumn and lick her wounds. By spring, when she finally realized she should be getting into something, there was another crop of graduates vying for recognition. Each year, it became easier to stay home with her parents and step aside for the next year’s graduates. She never understood how suddenly those graduates came from the next generation and not just from the next year.

For awhile she planned to take trips with a favorite cousin who lived in Kentucky. First they couldn’t agree on a destination, and then the cousin married a tobacco farmer from Virginia, moved to that state, and started having children. After that, the cousins never had much in common. And all thoughts of exotic trips together went by the wayside.

And now she heard that Jessica Horne was back in town. Once she’d babysat with Jessie, years ago. Someone said Jessie was dissatisfied with her singing career. Dissatisfied with getting away from her parents and from Clinton? Jessie had been away from this town, away from her parents. Jessie? Dissatisfied?! She should have to learn what it was like to have to wait for parents to die off before she could be free!

But, somehow, in the back of her Christian mind, was a small, nagging doubt that not even that would have given her freedom. She was a prisoner in a cage that she herself had built, and nothing could ever tear it down.

She’d done too good a job of building it.

Jessie drove far outside of Clinton, almost to the county line. She found the person she was looking
for at a run-down farm.

“Jessie Horne! I declare. I do declare.” The woman fussled with her wayward hair and wished she was wearing something besides a shapeless, dirty blouse. “I never thought I’d see you again.”

“We were best friends in high school, Pauline. Of course, I’d look you up.” Driving out, she wondered if she should try to hug Pauline. The squalling baby Pauline held decided the matter. The child’s nose was snotty.

“Well, come in. Come in.” Pauline used the baby to try to hide her fat thighs from Jessie’s eyes. But babies don’t come that big, especially if the mother is wearing tight red shorts.

“Lord love a duck, it’s a mess in here.” Pauline kicked aside a toy tractor, and the boy on the floor let out a squall. “Mickey, move that junk out of the center of the floor, or you’ll find it out in the yard. You know what your daddy told you would happen if he stubbed his toe on some toy again in the house.”

“If this isn’t a good time, Pauline, I could come back.”

Pauline waved away Jessie’s protests. “Never would be a good time, girlie.” She sank with a heavy plop into a recliner. A spring screamed and hit the floor. The baby bounced on her mother’s ample lap. Pauline wiped a plump hand over her sweaty face, grinned, and showed Jessie a mouth with three missing teeth. “Sure is hot for March, ain’t it?”

Jessie wore a jacket and hadn’t noticed the warmth, but she didn’t have Pauline’s insulation, either. “Spring’s going to be early this year.”

“Heard your daddy was getting hitched again. Figured you might come back for it. Bet it doesn’t set too well with your mama, though. I remember Miss Billie being mighty possessive of your daddy.”

“No, it doesn’t.” Jessie had forgotten how direct Pauline could be. Jessie was trying to identify Pauline as the person she’d known ten years before. If they’d met on the street now, Jessie might’ve passed her by unrecognized.

“I’d knowed you anywhere, Jessie. I’ve seen you on TV several times. But seeing you close up now, you’ve changed. Your face looks thinner. Looks like you need a good rest.”

Jessie couldn’t deny that. “That’s why I’ve taken some time off. My excuse was Daddy’s wedding. My reason was I had to get away for awhile.”

“Thought we’d be hearing about your wedding anytime now. You know, to one of them country-western stars.” She tried to look coy. “Bet those guys are pretty hot, huh?” A savage laugh gurgled deeply in her throat.

Jessie glanced at the boy on the floor. He looked to be about five years old. Little pitchers have big ears, Grandma used to say. Jessie bet the boy understood more than Pauline thought.

He did. “What’s hot, Mama?”

“What your butt’s gonna be if you don’t stop listening to your elders. Go on outside now. Go on. Get!” She used the toe of her shoe to catch him in the crotch and sent him rolling across the floor.

“Ouch, Mama! That hurt!”

“It’ll hurt worse if I have to get up. Go on now. Get! Little hellion!” she muttered as the sniveling
child obeyed grungingly.

“You have just the two youngsters then?”

“There’s an eight-year-old in school. Bus will drop him off pretty soon, and then all hell will break loose. He’s headed for a juvenile detention home, that one.” She sighed deeply and the little girl dozing against her breast bounced. “Yeah, I’m caught here good.” She threw her hand in a wide arc. “Survey my kingdom! My home, my castle! Humph!”

Jessie looked around at the rickety furniture and the peeling wallpaper. She could think of nothing good to say about the dump.

“Andy’s always going to fix the place up. Soon as his ship comes in, he says. Between you and me, I think that damned old boat done sunk a long time ago!” She curled her nose up in a sneer and lost whatever prettiness she once had possessed. “Andy’s nothing but a dreamer. I know that now. If I’d gotten my license to fix hair, at least I would’ve had a career. And if I’d listened to Andy and had an abortion, I wouldn’t be saddled with all these kids. I could’ve even stopped with one kid, but, no! I had to have three. With one, a person could manage to work and raise the kid. But with three brats, and so far apart in age, I’m stuck. And wouldn’t you know it? I’m late again this month. Probably another brat on the way.” She rolled her eyes. “Oh, joy. Oh, joy.”

Jessie stood up to leave. “You’re having a bad day. I should’ve called ahead.”

“Oh, Jess, don’t leave yet.” She dumped the baby in the chair, and the child began to cry. “We have so much to talk over. Remember the time when the home economics girls boiled rotten eggs, and school had to be dismissed because the stink went all through the building?” She rocked with peals of laughter. “We couldn’t have home ec class for a week! It took that long to be rid of the stink!”

But Jessie did not laugh. The only thing that held her to Pauline was memories. That’s all they had in common now.

“I really do have to be leaving now. I just wanted to see you again.”

“But--”

“I’ll be here for a few weeks. Perhaps I can drop in again.” She was afraid Pauline wanted to hug her and looked for a way to avoid the encounter. “Should your son be pulling that cat’s tail?”

Pauline went stomping off. “Mickey, I’ve told you a thousand times to leave that cat alone. If she scratches your eyes out, you’ll deserve it. When I catch you--”

Jessie didn’t listen to the rest of the threat. She jumped in Billie’s compact car and sped out of the farmyard.

An hour later Jessie sat sipping tea with Lisa, another classmate. Lisa’s house was immaculate and her baby daughter cooed contentedly at their feet.

“Yes, Pauline has let herself go.” She raised an eyebrow. “And that’s putting it mildly.”

“It was really quite startling.”

“But I understand how she feels.”
“Looks can be deceiving. Oh, I shouldn’t complain. Danny has given me a fine home and two wonderful children.” She looked steadily at Jessie. “But I, too, had the choice of an abortion, and I made the same decision as Pauline.”

“I didn’t know you had to get married.”

“Jeffy was six weeks premature, or so we told people. There were some raised eyebrows, but most of them came down in a wink. Hasty marriages happened all the time back then. I wasn’t bright enough to have The Pill; and I wouldn’t have an abortion, even if it was legal. I couldn’t get a decent job because I’d had no training beyond high school. All I could do was stay home and raise Jeffy.” She shrugged her shoulder. “Now I’ve got Mallory and I’m more or less trapped. At least you’ve gotten to do something with your life.”

“Funny, I was thinking the same about you. At least you’ve got a home and children.”

“I guess the grass really is greener. Depends on which side of the fence you’re looking.”

“And you’ve got Danny.”

Lisa frowned “He never really got to try himself out, either. I think he’s getting tired of working at Kelly’s Garage. He keeps talking about going to truck driving school. Jessie, if he starts over-the-road hauling, I’ll lose him. He always was something of a flirt, and trucking will put him away from home a lot. He’ll have a girl at every stop, or I’ll think he will. The trust will go out of our marriage, and then there won’t be a marriage anymore.”

“Go to truck driving school with him.”

“I’ve thought about doing that, but who’ll take care of the kids?”

Driving down the road, Jessie thought about Lisa’s problems. It made Jessie’s problems not seem so big, but they still existed. She decided everyone was trapped. How did someone realize that a hasty decision made as a teen would permanently color, or even set in stone, the rest of life?

Jessie looked thoughtfully at the Coke can in her hand. “Remember when this stuff didn’t come in cans?”

Sam Benedict grunted with a half-laugh, and then looked thoughtful, too. “Must’ve been about a million years ago. That’s how long ago it seems since I was a kid.”

She studied his pensive face as he sat behind his desk in City Hall. “How come you never left here, Sam?”

He stirred himself and set his Coke down on a clear spot on the desk. “It got too easy to stay, I guess. Hell, you know how it was with Kathy and me. We were on fire that last year in high school. All we had on our minds was getting married as soon as we graduated. By the time we cooled off, everyone else was in the service, or going to college, or working at a good paying job. They were starting to get some returns for their efforts. Fred Wilson built a new house. John Bryant was driving new cars every year. Kathy and I wanted that stuff, too, but our jobs weren’t paying us enough to afford those things. We started bickering, and money became a real wedge in our marriage. In a way, it was a good thing we’d never had kids because we were drifting apart. When she had a chance to go out West, I didn’t have the heart to stop her. Last I heard, she’s remarried and doing real good. Even has
a baby. I guess we were both too young back then to make a real go of our marriage. After she left, I did a hitch in the Navy, then came back here. Being away awhile showed me I didn’t have to escape to live. The difference was in me, not where I was living.”

“That’s strange. I’m starting to think the same way. And it’s just been since this trip home.”

Sam smiled without humor. “You’ve reached a watershed in your life, girl.”

“A what?”

“A watershed. A parting of the waves. A crossroads.”

“A seven-year-itch?”

“Yeah, I guess that would be one way of saying it.”

“I don’t like it much.”

“It can scare the hell out of you.”

“I feel, ah, discontented, out of sorts.”

“That’s because you know you’re going forward, but in the process you’ll be leaving something behind. And it’s going to be something that’s been important to you, otherwise you wouldn’t have hung onto it so long.”

“I’m scared of the future because I don’t know what I’ll find.”

“And you’re already mourning what you’re going to be leaving behind.”

Jessie arched an eyebrow. “Guess you’ve been there.”

“Everybody has, sooner or later. But that doesn’t make it any easier for the next person. People can give advice, but nobody can prevent someone else from going through it.”

“Remember ten years ago, Sam, when we were eighteen? We thought we knew it all. And the kids now still act the same as we did. Racing around, trying to impress each other. The thinkers questioning life. The others just living, without thinking. Trouble is, they aren’t doing anything any different than we did.”

Sam smiled. “I’d be disappointed if they didn’t rebel, though. At least they’re normal. They’d probably be miffed if they knew we thought they weren’t doing anything new.”

“But what kind of examples are we to them, Sam?”

“No better or no worse than what we had, Jess.” He studied her. “Been questioning yourself some, haven’t you?”

She sighed. “Oh, I don’t know, Sam. I thought I had it all together until I came back here.”

He smiled. “And some things change and some things are still the same and always will be. The clichés are true.”

“I’m beginning to think that life is a cliché.”

“End of winter is a bad time to come home. Snow’s melting and exposing all kinds of trash that’s
better off hidden. Last year’s leaves are half rotted and the new grass isn’t up to hide the mess and show us a fresh season. And a lot of the exposed trash isn’t all outdoors, either.” He looked wise.

“The thinkers leave high school to change the world and find Life waiting for them. They have to compromise. Ideals slowly change too practical concerns. We have to eat. We have to work. We have to get along with folks. We forget, until the next generation of thinkers comes along and starts carping about ideals. Then we remember. Sadly we remember those long-ago feelings we had when the world was fresh and we didn’t have all the emotional and everyday problems to drag along that we do now. And we can’t tell the new generation. We can’t warn. We can’t explain. Maybe we don’t have the nerve. The words simply won’t come. They have to learn for themselves. That’s what Life is, after all, isn’t it? Learning? A part of us envy their enthusiasm, maybe a little jealously. But maybe, just maybe, and I hope to hell that this is true, maybe a few of those thinkers can change things.”

“A few have, or we’d still be living back in caves. And have you ever noticed? Men have brought on the changes?”

“I’m going to called a chauvinist if I answer that truthfully. What’s wrong? Think men are unfeeling clods?”

“I’ve met a few.”

“And you’re thinking there’ll be a few more in your future.” Sam wrinkled his brow in thought. “People don’t plan a future. They do things to get them through a present situation and that determines the future. A marriage that seems to ease a problem, birthing a child instead of going through a conscience-ridden abortion, letting a situation go because any sort of life is better than no life at all. I guess it boils down to not wanting to cause ourselves any more pain than we have to.” He glanced at her. “Reckon you’re been finding that out. Understand you’ve been out visiting some of our old classmates.”

She breathed deeply. “That’s right, Sam, and it’s been an eye opener. They’ve changed. We’ve all changed. We’ve become the older generation we were rebelling against ten years ago.”

Sam watched his hand gently thump a pencil on the desk top. He let his breath out noisily. “Yup!”

“Welcome to the real world. Ain’t what we expected, is it?”

“You bastard! You won’t give me any real answers, either, will you?”

He grinned. “Nope.” Then he sobered. “Wish I could,” he said thoughtfully. “Then we’d both know.”

The next day, Jessie drove over to the county seat to visit a friend who taught in the high school there. Jeanne seemed to have made a success of her life, but Jessie discovered Jeanne wasn’t happy, after all. She had taken a leave of absence to care for her young husband who was dying of cancer. Left alone with a small child to raise, Jeanne would have a hard life ahead of her. Jessie didn’t even disturb her.

Brenda’s house was on the way back to Clinton, so Jessie stopped to visit. Brenda had married an older man and seemed perfectly contented as she ushered Jessie into her home. Brenda had always been so much fun. Maybe she could cheer Jessie up. She needed cheering after learning about Jeanne’s tragic life.

“Oh, Jessie, it’s so good to see you!” Brenda’s grin slashed across her chubby face. She brushed
dark curls aside. “Are you going to be home for awhile?”

“I took a few weeks off.”

Brenda leaned forward. “Oh, I don’t know how you can stand to be away from performing! All those gorgeous men!” She threw back her head and crowed in delight. “Gives me goose bumps! I read all about entertainers. I like to keep up.”

“You do?”

“Yes. See?” She scratched around a pile of magazines on the coffee table. Another stack formed a puddle around the base of the floor lamp. “I subscribe to PEOPLE and STAR and the NATIONAL INQUIRER. Herb even likes to read them.”

Jessie glanced at the television. An afternoon soap opera was playing. Brenda had turned the sound down, but she kept stealing glances at the silent action.

“Well, I just wanted to stop a few minutes and see how you were doing. I don’t want to take up anymore of your time. I’ll be running along.”

Brenda waved her down. “You haven’t seen my little angels yet.” She scurried and returned a few minutes later with two little girls in tow and a third in her arms. The children were dressed in pastel-colored dresses and wore matching ribbons in their long, dark hair. They looked like they were ready to go to a formal birthday party or Sunday School. Brenda beamed with pride, but Jessie was taken aback. Could normal children be kept that clean?

“Herb likes to see his girls looking like little ladies.”

Jessie felt sorry for the girls. They were ‘play pretties’ instead of children. Their eyes haunted her as she drove down the road. What a rude awakening Herb and Brenda were going to have in a few years when their daughters rebelled.

Since Jessie had borrowed her mother’s compact car for three different days to travel in three different directions across Hickory County, she decided to stop and get the gas tank filled, just as she had promised she would. Picturesque Caruthers Corners was at the convergence of two farm roads and had once been quite a bustling market town for the nearby farmers. Now there was just a general store and a gas station. When the elderly owners finally retired, there wouldn’t be even these businesses. And Caruthers Corners would become just another ghost town and wide place in the road.

Jessie pulled up to the solitary gas pump, but nobody appeared to see what she wanted. Maybe they had to be summoned. She pulled herself out of the compact car and climbed the rickety steps to the general store. The screen door stuck as it did anytime someone opened or closed it. Jessie pulled and held the flimsy door while it vibrated like a violin string in her hand. She feared if she pulled too briskly of having the whole door in her hand.

“Be with you in a minute,” a disembodied voice called from behind the small counter where packaged peanuts and tobacco cans lay heaped together in dust.

Lazy man, thought Jessie. Won’t plane the door. Not out front for customers. If she wasn’t thirsty
besides needing gasoline, she would’ve gone on. Surely, he couldn’t do much harm to a bottle of cold cola. The quaintness of the place, she thought, as she looked around. And the dust!

Jessie piled down on a stool, sighed as the rotating fan struck her, and sucked in a lungful of cool air. This made up for this dump! That and the George Strait song playing. Or was it Ricky Van Shelton? Whichever one didn’t matter. They both reminded her of her favorite singer, Ernest Tubb. Let other people idolize Randy Travis. She’d take these other singers.

As she drove onward to Clinton, she thought about the visits she’d paid in the last few days. She’d talked to relatives and high school friends and recreated scenes from her childhood. But she’d still found no answers she could nail down. And her melancholy and unrest had only deepened.

But concern for herself completely vanished when she finally drove into town and heard the startling news that was vibrating from every street corner. Brian Conyers was dead! The up and coming lawyer and well known womanizer, who thought he had the world by the ass, was dead.

Not only was he dead, he’d been murdered. The town was aflame with gossip. Who had done the dastardly deed? Some thought the killer deserved a medal. But who? Some person who’d lost a case against him? Some woman who’d been jilted by him? Somebody who objected to his shady real estate dealings in Memphis? Some irate parent whose son had been indicted for drunk driving and motor vehicular homicide? The murderer could be almost anybody, and the first one suspected was his estranged wife.

Pale and distraught, Shelly wrung her hands and declared her innocence. Unluckily, she had no alibi.

People began backtracking to see where they were at the time of the killing so they could vouch for their innocence. Who had shot Brian at the Conyers hunting lodge?

“Hell, suspects won’t be hard to find,” one old gentleman quipped. “Most likely, you’ll have to have them take a number.”

Some suspects had good alibis. Shelly’s brother Beau and his family were in Knoxville. Brian’s Uncle Buck had been meeting with one of their biggest competitors in the real estate game, and the two rivals could begrudgingly give each other an alibi. Other people weren’t so lucky. Who watches someone reading a book in the back parlor or who remembers someone strolling down a deserted country lane? The murderer would have to be found quickly, or half the county would be suspects.

Some deaths happen when least expected, without logic or convenience or dignity, and leave a sense of incompleteness along with anger and bewilderment to the survivors. Brian Conyers had led a well-ordered life, but he certainly left a mess with his passing. Of course, since he’d been murdered, he really couldn’t be held accountable for all the untidy details. The murderer, whomever he or she may be, was responsible for that.

“I don’t know who in the hell killed him, Jess,” Sam Benedict said with a sigh as he steered his old pickup down a country road. “I’m glad I’m not the sheriff on this one. George called in the State boys. The investigators will almost have to start listing people who wouldn’t have shot Brian, then those who couldn’t have shot him. His mother and most children under five years of age would fill the first category. You’re in the second.”

“Me?!”

“You couldn’t be a suspect because you were in another part of the county visiting our old
“Was I ever a suspect?!”

“Could’ve been. You had a motive. Shelley is your cousin, and you could’ve decided to have helped her. Besides, Brian was trying to hit on you. Don’t look so shocked. This is a small town. News beats a person down Main Street. You’ve been away long enough to have forgotten that, apparently.”

“Guess I’ve become a little famous and that brought me to Brian’s attention. Or maybe he just wanted to needle Shelly by flirting with her cousin.”

“It always comes back to Shelly.”

“She didn’t shoot Brian! She couldn’t have!” She glanced at Sam. “Could she?”

“Even you’re not too sure. Shelly’s always acted like a frightened little quail. No disrespect to your cousin, Jess, but there’s never been much tiger in Shelly. But sometimes those quiet ones are the people who commit murder. Still waters, and all that.”

“You’ve seen the police reports. Weren’t there any clues as to who did it?”

“Nothing obvious. The State boys are going over the lodge thoroughly. But that place must’ve been Grand Central Station. We’re finding traces of all sorts of people out there.”

“I suppose there were no witnesses. Was gunfire heard? Was someone seen fleeing? Surely there was an eye witness.”

“Just Hildy.”

“Great!” Jessie frowned. “Who’s Hildy?”

“Brian’s Golden Retriever. Some of the guys even theorize Hildy killed Brian.”

“How?!”

“By knocking the gun over. It could’ve been propped against the wall, and Hildy might’ve brushed against it, causing it to fall. There’s scratch marks on the wall as if the gun might’ve raked down it.”

“But, somehow you don’t buy that theory, I’m thinking. Why not?”

Sam frowned. “Because Brian knew how to handle guns. That was his specialty, especially in the Boy Scouts. Ed Barton, Brian’s old Scout Master, taught him better than that. Brian would never leave the safety off and lean the gun carelessly against the wall. I can’t imagine Brian setting a gun down like that, even for a moment.”

“Could it be planted evidence?”

“That’s what I’m thinking. The killer was trying to make the shooting look like an accident.”

“Is that why we’re headed for the lodge now? On your day off?”

Sam looked at her with a lazy grin. “Maybe. And maybe I just wanted to spend a little time with a pretty girl.”

“Oh, Sam, you’re being foolish now.”
“Two old friends going for a Sunday afternoon spin?”

She lifted her eyebrow and studied his lazy grin. There seemed to be a plea for tolerance behind it. If there hadn’t been Kathy and if there hadn’t been Jessie’s singing, Jessie and Sam might’ve gotten together years ago. Couldn’t two old friends who’d once been near-misses spend some companionable time together?

“A Sunday afternoon spin?” Jessie smiled. “What harm can that bring?”

He let his breath out in a huff. “Good!”

They looked at each other and laughed.

“Actually, we’re going to Tucker’s Mill. Remember that?”

“The most famous make-out spot in Hickory County?! How could I forget?! Just what are your intentions, Mr. Benedict?!”

Sam laughed “Nothing dishonorable. The millstream comes out below Conyers’ lodge.”

“And you think some clues might’ve washed down the stream? That’s stretching a hunch, isn’t it, Sam?!”

He shrugged. “Probably. But it’s a nice day for a pleasant walk in the country. And Tucker’s Mill is still the prettiest spot in the county.”

“Sounds like you get out here a lot.”

He actually blushed. She was charmed by his embarrassment.

They sat in the pickup looking out across the gently rolling meadow that sloped down the hill to a river hidden in the trees. The roof of the deserted mill was caving in, but that only added to its quaintness and beauty.

Jessie narrowed her eyes and looked at the meadow through the eyes of memory. “The whole place was a carpet of yellow wildflowers in the spring. The songs of a dozen birds fought to be heard at once. When I picture Heaven, this is one of the places that comes to mind.” She glanced at Sam. “Do the kids still come out here to make out?”

“Nothing can keep them away. In the daytime, they frolic in the meadow and the woods. The mill draws them at night. They come hunting the ghost.”

“The Ghost of Tucker’s Mill. How we loved to be frightened by that story!” She shivered. “And now Conyers Lodge will have its own ghost.”

Sam grinned. “Let’s just hope the lodge doesn’t have the same problem with kids running through it the way they’ve always gone through the mill. The ghosts aren’t half as spooky as what the kids do in the shadows.”

“There’s probably a lot of babies can trace their origin back to that mill.”

“Kids! Lord love them, they never change.”

“But adults do, don’t they, Sam? People grow up and change, and they get old.”
“And back then we thought that’d never happen, at least not to us. But I think you and I have aged worse than any of the people in our class. I don’t mean we’ve aged physically, just in spirit.” He kneaded the steering wheel gently with his hand. “I hate what we’ve become, Jess. And I think neither one of us realized it until we met up again. I think there’s only one way we can save ourselves, and that’s together.”

Tears sprang into her eyes and she knew what he said was true. But it was all happening too fast, and she needed time to digest it. And he was much, much too serious.

“Misery loves company?” she quipped, hoping to lighten the conversation.

He leveled his eyes at her, more in anger than disappointment. “What does that mean?”

“You’re wrong about us, Sam. We don’t love each other. We should have something more in common than pain.”

He frowned. “You still believe in love?”

“It helps. Oh, Sam.” Her voice was ragged as she said his name. She looked out into the meadow. “People have romped out there for generations. They believed in love. My parents married for lust. I doubt if they were ever in love. They were never friends.” She glanced back at him. “When I was sixteen years old, I would have gladly come out here to Tucker’s Mill with you. I just don’t feel that way anymore. But I do like you, Sam. YOU. Not the football hero who put stars in my eyes over ten years ago. Right now, I want you for a friend. I don’t want to jeopardize that with something rash.”

“I wasn’t suggesting an affair.”

“I know,” she barely managed to whisper. “And that’s what is scaring the hell out of me.”

In the end, Jessie got on a bus bound for St. Louis. She told her mother she was visiting friends there, but Jessie was really fleeing Sam. She wasn’t ready to make a commitment to him. Aunt Kay had said that Jessie was at a crossroads and that was what caused her discontent. Since singing had been her dream and wasn’t making her happy now, Jessie had to change dreams. Could her dream be getting married and settling down? That would make her so ORDINARY, though!

But the main reason Jessie fled Clinton was her growing feelings for Sam. She might not have the resistance to turn him down again and she might not want to. They might try marriage and make a terrible mistake that would scar them forever. She had to protect her heart. And Sam’s.

As the bus rolled her ever closer to St. Louis, she knew she had made the right decision in leaving Clinton. Too many distractions there made it impossible for her to think clearly. Perhaps in St. Louis she could sort out her life and make choices that would hurt the fewest people.

She hoped she could also be kind to herself.
“Damn!” Pris angrily ground out her smoke. “Damn cigarette!” She shoved aside her cup, sloshing cold liquid on her desk blotter. “Damn coffee!” She jumped to her feet and paced the worn carpet on her office floor. She rubbed at the back of the neck which seemed to be developing a permanent crick in it. She knew she should give up cigarettes and coffee. She knew she should lose some weight and exercise more. She knew she should develop some new interests and thus widen her horizons. She knew she should cut her hair and use less brutal makeup. She knew she should toss away these old war-horse clothes that she wore as a uniform. She knew she should change apartments and give that mangy, old cat to her landlady as a parting gift. She knew, she knew, she knew! It’d be different if she didn’t, but she knew, for Christ’s sake. So shut up about it, already! All right?!

Priscilla Carey was having a bad day. Hell, a bad week. It probably had to do with her brother Richard deciding to retire early and travel. He was ten years older than Pris, but what was ten years at this time in their lives? To Richard, this retirement meant that he and his wife Judith could finally take that long-planned trip around the world. To his sister Priscilla, it meant that the cold wind of old age (and, yes, ultimately, death) was swirling around their shoulders. Maybe that cold wind was what was causing the crick in her neck.

And Pris was facing old age (and, yes, ultimately, death) virtually alone. She had no family except for what she claimed through her brother Richard. (Oh, yes, this is our Aunt Pris. She’s such a doll! I’m sure she won’t mind sitting with the baby so we can go out.) Just like she hadn’t minded sitting with Richard’s children while he and Judith had taken glamorous evenings out on the town. Sure, she didn’t mind. Sure.

Pris was what, in gentler times, had been called ‘a maiden lady.’ Not that being in that pristine state had ever bothered her. She had been raised by an old-fashioned mother in Albany, New York, and had been lectured that certain maidenly ‘conditions’ were left intact until the maiden’s wedding night. Well, her ‘condition’ was STILL intact. And if current literature and films were to be believed, she was the only female over the age of eleven with that ‘condition’ left undisturbed.

Menopause hadn’t bothered her. She’d sailed through that with nary a sideways glance. To Priscilla, ‘change of life’ was something that disrupted married women. They were the ones who had to worry about holding a husband, not her. At least, she did not have that excess baggage to lug about.

Her observation was that most husbands were little boys with paper-thin egos. A wife had to cater to her mate to keep him from pouting. Or, worse yet to Pris, a wife prostituted herself to her husband to get something she wanted. Why should a wife have to do that? Other human beings didn’t. Besides, female wiles seemed dishonest to Pris. She thought that a primary basis of any marriage should be honesty.

Pris stared out the window onto a busy street in New York City and thought back through the years she had lived. Where had it all gone? Where was that eager coed who’d graduated from Vassar over thirty years ago? Where was that young writer who was going to take the literary world by storm with her stunning first novel?

Here, right here, here I am, she thought as she frowned. Right here where I’ve been for the last twenty years: editing stories for a confession magazine. Right here in a job I’d once hooted at in disdain, but right here in a job I’m damned lucky to have.

She had tried to write stories, but her characters did not live. That was what that long-ago editor had
told her. ‘To record life,’ he’d said, ‘you must live life.’ Even he’d sensed Pris would be nothing but an old maid existing on the outer fringes of another person's world. She’d never experience any true existence of her own.

But unless she got back to work, she’d have no job to support the small amount of life that she did have. In spite of principles, she still had to eat. So did that damn mangy that at least kept her company during otherwise lonely evenings.

Pris straightened her gray wool skirt, tucked in her striped blouse, and settled at her desk to read another person's story. For she was a story editor, and she had enough savvy to know if another person's story was fit to be published in her employer’s magazine.

I’m in love with him--
I DON’T WANT TO BE HIS KID SISTER

The first time I saw Mike Langley, I thought he was the greatest thing to hit our little town of Eastbrook in a long time. He certainly brightened up the cafe where my best friend Dena and I had gone after school that day.

“I can’t believe anyone that cute can be a cop!” I blurted.

“Well, believe it, because he is,” Dena answered as she absently sucked on her strawberry shake as she slumped in our booth. “You should study your biology as much as you’re studying him. Memorizing his face won’t help you recite in class tomorrow.”

“But don’t you think he’s cute?”

Dena shrugged. “Personally, I don’t like his face. Too moody looking for me.”

I glanced across the aisle of the Dairy Diner at the new cop’s dark head bent over French fries and a burger.

“That’s just a romantic facade.”

Dena stopped slurping. “Romantic facade?! What have you been reading? Wuthering Heights? You know, Amy Ann, some guys who seem moody might actually just BE moody. He might not be much fun to be around. Besides,” she said as she pushed her empty cup away, “he’s been stopping a lot of the kids for speeding.”

I lifted my eyebrows in what I hoped was a haughty, sophisticated manner. “He’s merely doing his job.”

“Doing his job?! My gosh, Amy Ann, sometimes I don’t know about you. Come on, let’s go. I have to get home and study for that algebra test tomorrow. So do you, if you want to go to Jill’s party Friday night. Remember what your father said? Pull your grades up, or else.”

I groaned. “I didn’t want to be reminded, Dena. I’d rather think of something important, like the new cop in town.”

“Oh, honestly, Amy Ann! Get your head out of the clouds. He’s only a guy.”

“But what a guy!” I saw Dena roll her eyes. “Does he have a girlfriend?” I asked as we slid out of the booth. Mike Langley glanced up at us, the way people do when they see movement.

“Probably several, if other girls are as attracted to him as you are.” Dena stared at me. “Why are you
walking so goofy? Is your foot asleep? What’s wrong with your eye? Did you get something in it?”

“Shh!” I hissed at her. “I’m trying to make him notice me.”

“Well, you’re succeeding. I’ve never seen such a puzzled look on anyone’s face. He probably thinks you’re demented. And he’s right. You are.” She grabbed the door handle. “Let’s get out of here before he calls for reinforcements.”

“Oh-h-h!”

Dena looked annoyed. “Now, what?”

“I left my purse back in the booth.”

“Well, go get it and hurry up.”

I scurried back to our booth and felt Mike Langley’s eyes on me the whole way. He must’ve thought I’d experienced a miracle cure because I was walking normally now.

I grabbed my clutch bag, whirled, and side-stepped to miss a family seating themselves in the next booth. Avoiding them brought me close to Mike’s booth. A small child collided with my legs and spun me off-balance. I saw Mike rising to catch me as I fell toward him. We landed with a bump in his booth, and I gasped as the table’s edge bruised my ribs. More importantly, I felt Mike’s strong hands on my bare arms. He grunted more with surprise than pain at my sudden weight in his lap. His plate flipped, sending French fries and catch-up flying all over us.

I was so humiliated, I didn’t want to look up.

Mike shook me slightly. “Are you all right, Miss?”

I quickly nodded my head and shot a look at his concerned face. Golly, it was close to mine! Close enough to kiss! I wasn’t ready for this! I twisted out of his lap and ran toward Dena.

“Are you okay?” she demanded at the door.

“I don’t want to talk about it!” I tore out of the café and down the sidewalk.

Dena stumbled beside me. “Hey! Not so fast!”

“Either keep up, or leave me alone!”

“Miss!”

Dena grabbed my arm. “Amy Ann, he’s hollering at you. The new cop. He wants you to stop. Hear him hollering?”

“Let him holler!”

“Miss!”

Dena’s hand was more insistent. “You’ve got to be polite, silly. After all, what can he do? Arrest you?”

“Yeah,” I mumbled as we waited for him to catch up to us. “For French fry assassination.”

“Boy!” Mike gasped as he overtook us. “Are you girls on the track team?” He flashed a grin, and
Dena managed a thin smile in return. He was gorgeous! But my world was dying at his feet. I felt like a complete idiot.

“Here. You forgot this, Miss.”

“Thanks.” I took my purse out of his hand and winced at the pain in my ribs.

“You WERE hurt!”

“Just bruised some ribs.” I dared to look up. “How about you? I must’ve landed like on you like a ton of bricks.”

He grinned and I wondered why I ever thought he could be moody.

“You just surprised me, that’s all.”

“Uh, what about your uniform? It’s got all that grease and catch-up on it.”

“The cleaners will get it out.” He glanced down at his shirt. “I hope.”

“I’m sorry it happened. I could pay to have it cleaned.”

He held up his hand. “No apologies. It could’ve happened to anyone. And I won’t allow you to pay any cleaning bill. Well, if I can’t help you further, I’ll be on my way. See you around, girls.”

“Bye,” we mumbled at his retreating back.

“Oh, Golly, Dena! He hates my very being.”

“You should be so lucky! He probably doesn’t even realize that you’re alive.”

I sighed, knowing she was probably right.

By Sunday, my bruised ribs were better, but I didn’t need them to remind me of my humiliation. Mike Langley was a dreamboat, and I’d ruined my chances with him.

I was glum as Daddy and I sat waiting in our pew for church services to begin.

“Anything wrong, Amy Ann?” he murmured. “You seem so quiet this morning.”

I didn’t want to worry him, so I gave him a smile of encouragement and shook my head. “Nothing, Daddy.”

He glanced around and then whispered, “Where’s your Aunt Lillian?”

I shrugged. Hard telling what my crusading aunt was doing today. Teaching third-graders and managing our home didn’t keep her occupied enough. She was always trying to help someone, it seemed. Some people might even call her a busybody. Daddy simply said she was concerned about her fellow man. I just know that she was a godsend when she came to live with us after Mother died.

Just then I heard a shuffle at the end of our aisle.

“She is,” Daddy said. “And she’s got some stranger with her.”

I turned to see who she’d adopted now and froze when I recognized Mike Langley.
“My brother, Ed Strobel,” I heard her whisper to my father. “Mike Langley is our new patrolman.”

The two men smiled at each other and shook hands. I tried to sink into the pew.

“Nice to meet you, Officer. This is my daughter, Amy Ann.”

Mike nodded at me and grinned. “We’ve met.”

“Oh? Well, this is a small town. Sit down.”

Luckily, I was on the other side of Daddy and was too far away to shake hands gracefully. I mumbled something appropriate and caught a twinkle in Mike’s dark eyes. For the first time in my life, I realized how childish my name sounded.

That church service was a blur to me. All I could think of was Mike’s presence on the other side of my father and aunt. But the worst news came afterwards.

“I’m riding with Mike,” Aunt Lillian announced brusquely as we stood outside. “I’ll make sure he doesn’t get lost.” She saw the blank looks on my face and Daddy’s. “He’s coming to dinner, of course.”

Of course. And no one argued with Aunt Lillian.

I was so nervous, I barely pecked at Aunt Lillian’s sturdy roast beef and noodles. Everyone else shoveled it in, though, especially Mike.

“This is the best food I’ve had since I left home, Miss Strobel.”

“I told your mother I’d look after you properly.”

That statement got even Daddy’s attention. Although we never really compared notes on the subject, I think we both figured Aunt Lillian had a secret life she didn’t tell us about. Here was ample proof.

“I knew his mother in college, twenty-five years ago,” she explained to our questioning faces. “When Ellen learned Mike was moving here, she wrote to me. No mystery in that.” She pushed away from the table. “Well, you men go watch TV while we ladies clean up.”

“I’ll be glad to help, Miss Strobel.”

I looked up in alarm. If Mike was in the kitchen, I’d break all the crockery within reach and some that should have been out of harm’s way.

“Nonsense. That’s women’s work. And if you call me Miss Strobel again, I won’t answer you. Call me what Amy Ann does.”

Mike grinned. “All right, Aunt Lillian.”

I was shocked, but she beamed. How could he?! She was MY aunt, not his!

“Come on, son. We’ll get the TV warmed up. There should be a baseball game coming on.”

Now my father was calling him son! Had my family really adopted Mike Langley?! Did I have a new brother?!
After the dishes were done, Aunt Lillian and I went into the living room where the televised baseball game was entertaining Daddy and Mike.

“We ladies are going to Connie Mitchell’s bridal shower in a few minutes,” Aunt Lillian announced to the room. “We’ll be back in a couple of hours. Mike, I’ll expect to see you here when I return.”

Mike grinned from the easy chair he’d claimed. MY easy chair. “I’m not going anywhere, Aunt Lillian. I’m too comfortable.”

I gritted my teeth.

Augustus, Aunt Lillian’s big, old Siamese cat, sauntered into the room and looked Mike over. I smirked to myself, figuring the antisocial cat would certainly let Mike know that he was unwelcome in this house. But Augustus jumped into Mike’s lap, tucked his paws under himself, and began to purr. Mike, amazed, stroked the cat’s wise, old head. I considered the usually haughty cat to be a traitor.

Daddy chuckled. “Well, Mike, that cat seems to have taken quite a liking to you.”

Mike grinned. “And I to him.” His stroking hand was rewarded with a contented purr.

Daddy puffed on his pipe. “Just push him away if you get tired of holding him. He must weigh close to twenty pounds.”

“That’s all right, Ed. I don’t mind holding things on my lap. In fact, I’m getting used to it. Must be some hidden talent I never knew I had until now.”

He looked at me and I swear there was a mischievous twinkle in his eyes. I could’ve died of shame. He was laughing at me. And in my own home!

Out in the car, Aunt Lillian glanced away from her driving long enough to ask, “You don’t like Mike very much, do you? Mind telling me why not?”

I shrugged. It had nothing to do with Mike himself. It was really my own stupid behavior that had me ashamed. How could I tell her I’d gotten off on the wrong foot with him? She’d have little understanding for my romantic daydreams.

“He’s been stopping some of the kids for speeding, and I feel uneasy having him around.” It wasn’t exactly the truth; but it wasn’t a lie, either.

“You teenagers and your codes,” she muttered, but seemed to accept it. “To me, he’s just the son of an old friend. Granted, I haven’t heard much from Ellen since she left college. We were in the same class at State, and I guess I must’ve been pretty angry with her for quitting after our Freshman year to get married. She had such potential. But she wanted to raise babies, which she did. Five of them. Mike’s the second. He’s got an older married sister and a ten-year-old brother. The other two are teenage girls, just like you.”

‘Just like you’ echoed in my mind. Was I intended to remind Mike of his absent sisters?

“Mike misses his family,” she continued, “and we can help him by being friendly to him and having him over for dinner and family activities. It’s our Christian duty. Besides, I do have a personal interest in him.”
I hadn’t misunderstood her meaning. Aunt Lillian wasn’t noted for her subtlety.

She glanced at me. “And he can help us.” I returned her glance. “Your father seems to like him. Maybe they can become friends.”

I knew Aunt Lillian worried about Daddy. Since my mother’s death two years before, Daddy hadn’t mixed much. Sure, he saw people. He was a druggist. Customers were in and out of the drugstore all day. But after work, he preferred to stay home with us instead of socializing.

“Like us, Mike has had a recent sorrow. His father passed away quite suddenly last year.”

Sympathy stabbed me. “Oh,” I mumbled. “That’s too bad.” So Mike had known a crushing grief, too. Somehow, that made him seem more human to me.

“Mike’s father left the family reasonably well off, so Ellen doesn’t have to rely on Mike for financial help. She’s so grateful that he can pursue his own interests without being responsible for family burdens. That freedom is important to a young person. It can be positively exhilarating.” Aunt Lillian glanced down the street. “There’s Connie’s house now. You know, Connie’s only fourteen months older than you are. Next year at this time, people could be coming to your bridal shower.”

My eyes widened. It sounded so soon!

“Of course, I hope you go on to college and prepare yourself for a career. Every woman should do that as protection for her future. You can’t rely on a man to support you.”

She should know! She’d never married.

“And I might not be around to take care of you.”

That statement didn’t alarm me. It wasn’t an announcement that she was dying, merely that she might not always live in my father’s house.

“This is the end of your junior year in high school. You need to be thinking seriously about which college you’ll attend.”

College was the furthest thing from my mind. I was thinking about my wedding day.

I should’ve known we’d find Mike still at the house when we returned from the shower. And I should’ve known that Aunt Lillian would suggest a tennis game. Our home has one luxury: a tennis court in the backyard. Rarely do we have enough players for doubles, though. I hoped Mike would decline, but of course he didn’t. In fact, Aunt Lillian must’ve mentioned earlier that we might play because Mike excused himself to fetch his white shorts from his car.

After changing, we placed ourselves on the tennis court: Daddy and me were pitted against Mike and Aunt Lillian. Mike was so tan and handsome in his white T-shirt and shorts that I could barely concentrate on the game. I prayed I wouldn’t fall all over myself.

Daddy and I were reasonably successful, and we were all cheerful and relaxed as we mopped our hot faces on towels between sets. Aunt Lillian rattled on to Mike about how she and Daddy stayed in shape by playing tennis. She even dragged agreement out of Mike who winked at me with mirth crinkling around his dark eyes.

That wink shot me straight in the heart. What was wrong with me, anyway? He was not flirting, just
including me in a joke.

But I didn’t want to be pals with him. I wanted--

“Excuse me?” I’d been thinking so hard about Mike that I hadn’t heard what Aunt Lillian said.

“I said, I saw that wink. You two think that youth is all you need to win at tennis, don’t you? Well, Ed and I challenge you two to a match.”

“But I didn’t say--”

Mike grinned. “Come on, Amy Ann, we’ve got the ideals of youth to uphold. We can’t let these two think we’ll let them win just because they have a few years on us, can we?”

I should’ve been able to join in their lighthearted banter, but all I could think of as I followed Mike onto the court was being close to him.

I played like I’d suddenly developed two left feet, and neither one of them was coordinated. Balls whizzed past me while I sliced away at them moments too late.

“That was an easy one!” Aunt Lillian yelled. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing!”

“Getting tired?” Mike asked as he walked past me. There was no teasing from him then, only concern, concern for a friend.

That angered me. “No,” I said firmly as I brushed reddish-blonde strands of hair out of my face.

“Serve the ball, Daddy!”

I played harder, as if I was mad at that little round sphere. Daddy and Aunt Lillian complained about my backhand that shot the ball toward them like a bullet. Mike glanced at me curiously after I cut off a return that should’ve been his.

“Are we at war?” he asked me softly as he bounced the ball with his racket before serving. My only reply was to rock back and forth on my feet while I waited for play to resume.

Daddy returned Mike’s serve and the ball headed for Mike. I thundered toward it, cutting in front of Mike and slashing at the air. My body collided with Mike, sending him sprawling down hard on his rump. I was too stunned to say anything. It’d only been pure luck that’d kept him from being hit by my slashing racket.

“Are you hurt?” Daddy demanded as he ran up.

Mike grinned with his good nature showing on his face. “Only my dignity.”

“I think that’s enough tennis for one day.” Aunt Lillian shot me a cryptic look, but I was too dazed to pay her any attention. I could’ve hurt Mike with my foolish antics. As it was, I could barely face him.

“I’m sorry, I--”

Mike brushed off the apology as easily as he brushed dirt off his white shorts. “No harm done. I just have to be more alert around you, that’s all. Reminds me of something Penny might do.”

“Penny?” my father echoed.
One of my kid sisters. She’s a real competitor. She won’t let anyone get ahead of her, either. She’s a real scrapper.”

Somehow, being compared with his sister hurt worse than my humiliation.

After showering and resting, Mike was prepared to leave, but Aunt Lillian insisted he stay for a light supper.

“Nothing fancy, mind you. Just potato pancakes and applesauce.”

“JUST potato pancakes?! Mom told you that was my favorite dish, didn’t she?”

Aunt Lillian arched her eyebrow. “Maybe. And maybe I’m psychic.”

Mike winked at her. “I think I’m going to like this town.”

I was silent all through supper while Mike chatted easily with Aunt Lillian and Daddy. Once, though, when Daddy was talking about fly casting, I caught Mike looking at me in a puzzled way.

Claiming homework to do, I escaped to my room as soon as I dared. I couldn’t be around Mike any longer A terrible hurting sensation swelled in my chest. I stared at my textbook and waited.

At last I heard voices at the front door, and a car drove away. Mike was gone. The hurting pain in my chest burst open, and I cried my eyes out. I didn’t want him to go, and I couldn’t stand it if he stayed and neglected me.

I knew I was being stupid. I knew it was only a crush. I knew Mike wanted me only for a friend. But stupid or not, I was in love with him.

I didn’t see Mike for several days, and I was torn with agony and despair. This is silly, I told myself. I longed for any brief glimpse of him, but dreaded it, too. How should I act? How WOULD I act?

My ears listened for any mention of him by Daddy or Aunt Lillian, but they were maddeningly quiet about him. Of course, they didn’t realize that I wanted all of our conversations to revolve constantly around Mike.

Then that Thursday I learned there’s one thing worse than not seeming someone you’ve got a crush on, and that’s seeing him.

Dena I were leaving the dime store when Mike hollered at me from across the street. My heart raced. Not this soon! I tried to ignore him.

Dena poked my arm. “Mike Langley spoke to you.”

I tried to ignore her, too.

“Wait! He’s coming across.”
With my heart in my mouth, I watched Mike threading his way through traffic. Gosh, he looked cute in his uniform! I wondered if he liked the light blue dress I was wearing. Aunt Lillian said it was my best color.

Mike landed with a bounce beside us and took us both in with his smile. “Boy, this town sure wakes up when school’s out. Hi, Dena.”

Like a traitor, she returned his friendly greeting.

I could feel his teasing grin on me. “I guess you couldn’t hear me for the traffic when I was across the street. What’s your excuse for not hearing me now, Amy Ann?”

“Hi, Mike,” I said as deadpan as I could.

Mike looked around and breathed deeply in satisfaction. “Nice spring day we’re having.”

I could feel the venom on my tongue, but I couldn’t stop the hateful words. “It was, up until now.”

I heard Dena’s sharp intake of breath. My eyes swung up and I saw the deep hurt that had come into Mike’s face.

“Well, I--I--” He spun his wheels, and then got control of himself. “I have to be going. Goodbye, girls.” He didn’t even wait for an answer as he hurried away.

“What’s wrong with you, you air-head?” Dena hissed. “Have you broken out with stupidity? That was no way to act. He was just being nice to us.”

But I couldn’t answer. I felt out of sorts. All I was conscious of was seeing Mike’s hurt expression and knowing that I’d caused it.

“That’s odd,” Aunt Lillian said as she hung up the phone Saturday morning and stared at it. “I asked Mike Langley to come over tomorrow for dinner, and he said he couldn’t make it.”

“Maybe he has to go home this weekend,” Daddy suggested.

“He said that wasn’t the reason. In fact, he really never gave me an excuse. Hmm. Oh, well, maybe next Sunday.”

I’d almost bet he wouldn’t show up then, either. And I was pretty sure what this weekend’s reason was. Me. But he needn’t have worried. I was through with my crazy antics. After I’d seen his hurt face on Thursday, I’d decided romance wasn’t worth it.

Why would he ever be my boyfriend, anyway? When had he ever seen me when I wasn’t acting vain or childish? The best plan for me would be to give up my silly crush, apologize, and become his friend. He’d probably make a great pal.

But my heart wasn’t going to be in it.

That night as Dena and I headed for the show house, I got the chance to rectify my mistakes. Mike was standing near his patrol car, but looked away when he saw us approaching.

“Just a minute, Dena, I have some crow to eat.”

She glanced at Mike. “It’s about time. I’ll be inside.”
“Hi,” I said softly to him.

Mike started, and then answered in a quiet voice. “Hi, Amy Ann.”

“You, ah, going to the show?”

“No, I’m on duty.” His words were cautious as he gazed down the street at an approaching car. “You have a good time, though.”

“Thanks. Uh, Aunt Lillian said you couldn’t make it to dinner tomorrow.”

His jaw tightened. “Yeah, that’s right.”

“Even if I said we were having chocolate layer cake with fudge frosting?”

He melted. The little boy in him was intrigued as his eyes sparkled at me. “Chocolate cake?”

I smiled. “That’s right. With fudge frosting.”

He grinned, and I felt the golden warmth of his friendship flood over me.

“Oh, please come for dinner, Mike. I promise not to act like a spoiled brat anymore. I won’t even hog the tennis court this time.”

He laughed, and then sobered. “Thanks, Amy Ann. I thought maybe I was the one hogging in on your turf.”

“It was my fault. Generally, I’m nicer to our guests. I imagine I was a little jealous. My father and aunt accepted you immediately.”

“I did make myself at home pretty fast, didn’t I? But your family’s been awfully good to me. I appreciate the hospitality.”

“Yes.”

“Then we’ll count on you for tomorrow, okay?”

He agreed, but I felt like I was dragging leaded feet toward the show house. I had a new friend, and that was all.

Mike came for dinner and had two slices of chocolate cake and shared tons and tons of laughter with us. He and Daddy and Aunt Lillian acted as if they hadn’t seen each other for weeks instead of days. I had to admit I was enjoying Mike’s companionship, too.

Since it was raining and we couldn’t play tennis, we played rummy, instead. I relaxed and enjoyed myself. Everyone else seemed to be having a good time, too. I never saw an afternoon pass so quickly. Before we knew it, it was time for supper. Mike stayed, of course. For potato pancakes and applesauce, of course. And another slice of chocolate cake with fudge frosting. Aunt Lillian even sent some of the cake home with him. He left grinning at her like it was Christmas.

Later in my room, I remembered the warm smile of appreciation on Mike’s face when he said goodnight. And the private wink he gave me said he liked being my buddy.

But I didn’t want to be his buddy.

“I don’t want to be his kid sister!” I mumbled aloud. “But, darn it, that’s all he’s going to let me be.”
He loved me, but not the way I wanted.

Then followed a few golden days of friendship, and I think I matured quite a bit during that time. I tried to think first about Mike, his feelings, and the person he was. Before, all I'd seen in him was a male to have romantic daydreams about. Now, I saw him as a unique individual. Nobody in the whole world was Mike Langley, except Mike Langley.

And I felt my feelings about myself changing, too. I was learning that I could exercise what men down through the centuries have called ‘feminine wiles.’ It wasn’t exactly dishonest, but tact could go a long ways to keeping life peaceable. And with my growing confidence, I was learning to be more at ease with myself.

Mike and I didn’t do anything spectacular, just spent time together. Now that I wasn’t mooning over him or seething with jealousy, I discovered that he was a lot of fun to be around. Like most other young persons, he could laugh for the sheer joy of being alive. And he could point out things in my world that I’d missed. Things like the baby rabbits hidden in a dense corner of our yard or the golden red streaks of evening sun that were the same shade as my hair. I found I could walk with Mike along a dusty country road after school and talk quietly of things that bothered both of us. Things like our parents’ deaths and how scary it is to be an adult. But mostly, there was laughter together, a lot of laughter.

I was watching Aunt Lillian roll out pie dough on a Saturday morning when Mike sauntered in and sat down beside me at the kitchen table.

“That looks promising,” he said to Aunt Lillian.

“Apple pie for tomorrow.”

“Oh, boy, my favorite!”

Aunt Lillian paused to arch an eyebrow at him. “I’m beginning to think that everything’s your favorite.”

Mike grinned and punched me on the shoulder to share the joke. That’s when I discovered he had his arm draped across the back of my chair. The arm he punched was not the one next to him!

His hand dangled over my shoulder in a friendly embrace. Every molecule in me bristled with awareness. My jealousy might’ve been conquered, but my crush was still raw and vibrant. I longed to lean toward him and snuggle against Mike’s chest, but that would’ve shocked him and Aunt Lillian. After all, kid sisters didn’t do that sort of thing.

“What do you say, Carrot Top?” he asked as he used his newest nickname for me. “Can you cook as good as your aunt? If you can, there won’t be any guy safe from you.”

I ached to believe him, but in my heart of hearts I knew he was only teasing.

That afternoon Mike and I went bike riding with Dena out in the country. Spring was definitely here, and I still tingled from Mike’s arm around my shoulders. I wanted to believe it meant more than friendship.
We three had a great time until a racing car nearly forced us into the ditch.

“That was Roy Partee,” Mike said, sounding like a cop. “Probably laughing his head off because he caused us to scatter.” He frowned. “He knew I couldn’t chase him on this blasted bicycle!”

“Come on,” Dena urged. “Let’s not let him spoil our good time. He’s a creep, anyway.”

Mike grinned, his good humor restored. “You’re right! Race you to that big oak tree. Last one there’s a rotten apple. Unless you’re Amy Ann—”

Hearing my name brought my attention away from Roy Partee’s disappearing car.

“Unless you’re Amy Ann,” Mike repeated, “because she’s already rotten.”

“Why, you—”

Mike and Dena took off like shots. Of course, I was the last one to the oak tree and had to take their kidding good-naturedly. But I really didn’t have my mind on their silly race. I was thinking about Roy Partee and how he seemed to bother Mike.

I suppose all would’ve gone on the same if Laura Barton hadn’t come home from college that weekend and taken a shine to Mike. I saw them at church and Mike was grinning all over himself and leading her around like she was some sort of china doll. He canceled his dinner date with us, and Aunt Lillian froze the unused apple pie and said it’d keep until Mike could eat with us again. I wished my problem with him could’ve been solved that easily. I was green-eyed jealous.

But I knew how to get even. That next Friday was prom night. Since Dena and I didn’t have steady’s, we’d planned to go stag. But I used my newly discovered female wiles and got a date.

“A date?!?” Dena wailed. “With Roy Partee?! Are you completely air-headed?!”

“He impressed me with his car,” I said haughtily and marched away.

It didn’t take long for the grapevine in Eastbrook to let Mike know about my prom date. I knew Roy Partee would irritate him more than anyone else would’ve, and he did.

His mouth was grim as Mike looked down at me as we stood on my front porch. “Why Roy Partee?” he wanted to know.

I shrugged. “Why not?”

“He’s not the right date for you.”

“Since when does the Law tell a girl whom she can date?”

He slapped his hat on his thigh. “Doggone it, Amy Ann, this isn’t the Law speaking. I’m your friend. Get one of the other boys to take you to the dance. Roy Partee wouldn’t be decent company for you.”

I looked up at him through my lashes. “My, you don’t speak very highly of one of our local citizens.”
“I don’t know why you’re doing this, Amy Ann. I don’t want him to spoil your evening. Please think it over, won’t you?”

“I thank my friend for his concern,” I said demurely. “And I’ll think it over.” But I won’t change my mind, I thought as I watched him walking away from the house. I could tell his disgust by the tautness of his shoulders.

I spent a long, boring, embarrassing evening with Roy at the prom. All he cared about was popping his chewing gum and bragging about his car to the other boys. When he did dance with me, he tried to hog the floor and led me through some intricate steps that I couldn’t follow. When I stumbled once, everyone laughed, especially Roy. Dena looked like she was going to die of shame for me.

But I got my reward for my humiliating evening when Roy suggested a car ride and we saw Mike outside the school.

“I thought they were going to show you kids a movie after the dance,” Mike said.

“Oh, that’s okay for those jerks,” Roy said, nodding back at the school. “But we’re going to have some real fun.”

Mike stepped forward. “Don’t go with him, Amy Ann.”

“Why not?” Would he say what I wanted to hear?

“Your father wouldn’t like it. He thinks you’re safely under school supervision.”

“Maybe my father lets me decide these things for myself. What do you think about that, Officer?”

“I think maybe you’re not thinking too straight. Go back inside now, Amy Ann, and find Dena. Let Roy go joy riding by himself.”

“I’m not your kid sister, Mike Langley! You can’t tell me what to do! Come on, Roy! I want to go fast!”

And fast we went. Out over country roads we flew. I suppose I might’ve recognized them in the daylight, but now they flashed by in a blur of speed. I begged Roy to slow up, but he wouldn’t. I thought I was going to be ill.

At last Roy braked to a stop and turned to me. “We know now fast my car goes. Now, let’s find out how fast you really are.” He grabbed for me and I fought like a hellcat. The chiffon of my light blue prom dress tore, and I screamed. Then I socked Roy hard. He uttered a nasty name, shoved me out of the car, and threw gravel all over me as he sped away.

He’d dumped me about a mile out of town, but I was so mad I wouldn’t have noticed a ten mile hike. Somewhere in the dark, I stepped in a hole and broke the heel off one shoe. I must’ve made a pretty sight limping into town with my dress torn. Thank goodness, it was past midnight. Not many people would see me.

Car lights lit me up. I threw my arms over my head and ducked down a side street.

“Amy Ann! Wait! It’s me! Mike! Don’t run away, honey!”

But bawling and cussing and limping, that’s exactly what I did. I didn’t want Mike to see me in my
disgrace.

Then Mike was there. He grabbed my shoulder roughly as he yelled my name in my face. I blindly aimed a hay maker at him, but he ducked. He pulled me into the circle of his sheltering arms. At first I fought him, but then I melted against him like I’d always dreamed of doing. But not quite in this way with my clothes torn and my hair and makeup looking like such a mess. But I thought, this is Mike. He won’t care what I look like, just so I was safe. I felt so protected in his arms. Then I was bawling and yowling like a banshee. I hadn’t dreamed about doing that, but I did it, all the same.

“Aw, honey,” Mike soothed as he ran his hands up and down my back. “That’s why I didn’t want you to go with him. Did he hurt you?”

I sobbed against Mike’s chest and twisted his uniform blouse in my fist. I felt so safe. I stopped trembling. Maybe just friendship with Mike wasn’t so bad, after all. At least, he seemed to care what happened to me.

“Cause if he hurt you, honey, I’ll, I’ll, I’ll just have to kill him! That’s what I’ll do! I’ll kill him!”

Suddenly, I had to calm HIM down. He was being so macho, going to do something crazy just to protect a woman. Dare I hope HIS woman? But, first, he had to stop acting in the stupid category. He was a policeman, for heaven’s sake! A role model. “Oh, Mike, leave him alone!” I wailed. “I don’t want you to get in trouble over me!”

I could feel his lips on my hair as his hands gently rubbed my back. “Oh, little Carrot Top,” he said in a harsh whisper against my ear. “There’s no one I’d rather get in trouble over. Didn’t you know that?”

I stopped weeping and looked at Mike wide-eyed. Was he saying what I thought he was saying? “What about Laura?”

Mike loosened his grip, but still kept his arms around me as he frowned down at me with a puzzled look. “Laura? Laura who?”

“Your FRIEND at church!”

His face was still clueless. “Laura? Laura BARTON?! Do you mean Laura?! How did she get into this?!”

“You were all over her last weekend in church.”

“I was happy to see her. We’re old friends. I dated her several years ago, it didn’t work out, but we’ve remained close. We had a good chat Sunday afternoon. She’s thinking about getting married to a guy I know. I was catching up on her, and him. That’s all.” He frowned. “Is she what this has all been about?”

“Partly.” I took a deep breath. Here went anything. Time to test the waters. “And partly because I don’t want to be treated like your kid sister anymore.”

He grinned wryly. “I’ve been thinking about that crack ever since you made it. I decided it must have something to do with why I kept getting madder the more I thought about your date with Roy. I wondered all along why I should be so upset about two kids going to a school dance. Why should you be anything special to me, anyway? After all, you’ve acted silly and childish around me and have been jealous of the time I spent with your family. There’s even been occasions when you’ve been downright dangerous to be around. In your hands, a tennis racquet could become a dangerous weapon.”
“I won’t live that down in awhile, will I?” she asked in an apologetic voice.

“I’ll just question your motives whenever you pick up a tennis racquet.”

I laughed self-consciously. I did feel pretty stupid about that.

“It’s true that you’ve been a real pain to me, in more ways than one.”

I rolled my eyes. He was right.

“You haven’t offered me much to like, Amy Ann.”

“But you were willing to kill for me a few minutes ago,” I reminded him.

“And I still am. I’ve done a lot of thinking lately. There’s another side to you, a side I like to be with. I remembered I’d seen glimpses of another Amy Ann, someone who is mature and kind and gentle. And someone who makes me feel good about myself. My mind keeps going back to those quiet talks we’ve had and how close I’ve felt to you then.” He paused. “You haven’t give me much to like, it’s true. But it’s a start and I’m intrigued by you.” He shook his head in amazement. “I remembered a girl who could change my whole day around with just a smile or a pout. She’s got me all mixed up, and the amazing thing about that is that I’m enjoying it.” He squeezed my arms. “I never know what to expect from you from one moment to the next. Will it be loving or hating? But it sure is fun waiting to find out.”

I slapped his chest lightly. “You were infringing on my life. You charmed my family and my friends. I wanted to hate you for that, and couldn’t.”

“I know the feeling. It keeps coming out the opposite. Doesn’t it?”

I looked up into that warm grin to see if he’d meant what I thought he’d said. I gasped. He had. There was no mistaking that look of tenderness in his eyes. And it was all for me.

“Someday,” he continued with a slight huskiness to his voice. “Someday, when you’re not so upset, we’ll talk about this again.” He studied my face and seemed to be considering kissing me. “Someday soon.” He brushed a rough finger over my button nose and winked.

I arched an eyebrow. “That might be soon enough for you, Mike Langley, but not for me. You said you didn’t know what to expect from me next. Well, right now, you can expect this.”

I reached up to kiss him. He was startled at first, but caught on real fast that this was going to be one of my loving moments. He didn’t fight me at all.

Mike and I saw a lot of each other that next year, my senior year in high school, but we dated others just to make sure of our feelings. We always came back to each other.

The night I graduated from high school, Mike gave me an engagement ring. I went to our community college that fall because I’d promised Aunt Lillian I would. I dropped out after a semester, though, and married Mike on Valentine’s Day.

Aunt Lillian was disappointed that I didn’t finish my education, but I think she approves of our happiness. Maybe, in the years to come, I’ll regret that I never prepared myself for a career. Goodness knows we could use the second income! But right now, all I want is to be with Mike. We have to scrimp some on his salary, but we’re making a go of our marriage. I guess that’s all that two
people can expect nowadays. We may have troubles later on, but I have faith that we’ll be able to find solutions. You see, we love each other. And if a couple has that, nothing else really matters.

And, oh, did I mention that there’s going to be a baby real soon? Mike and I are hoping for a girl. That way our three-year-old son can have his own kid sister, just like his daddy does.

THE END

Pris tossed aside her pencil and stared into the far corner of the room to rest her eyes. What a pretty little story! But that was its basic flaw, too. It was too ‘pretty’ for a confession magazine. Some teenage book of short stories might welcome this tale, but it was not her place to suggest that to the faceless author. It was her job to place the manuscript, along with the standard rejection slip, into the return envelope and to toss it into the ‘out’ box.

Pris fingered the small piece of paper with the coldly written words of refusal written on it. ‘Thank you for allowing us to read your story. We are sorry to say that we do not need your story at the present time.’

What a cop out! What cold, heartless words to read with a returned manuscript. This story had been part of some writer’s cherished dreams. It had come not only from the mind, but also from the heart. Somebody had put his very soul into this work.

She could visualize the writer receiving back his manuscript. Weeks of hope were dashed when the mailbox was opened, and the manila envelope with the author’s handwriting on it was inside the box. The standard rejection slip was read with a smirk. It probably wasn’t the first rejection slip the author had ever received.

Once again, the author held his manuscript in his hands. It felt battered and used. Alien, unfriendly eyes had gazed at its innards, seeking mistakes instead of the intended beauty planted by the author. The advice was to try, try again. But oftentimes, the author simply filed away the story and tried to forget. For the magazine, it was a story that might help circulation. For the author, it was created from his heart and soul.

This manuscript was by some unknown writer and had not been solicited by the magazine. It had come in ‘over the transom.’ Most unsolicited manuscripts were returned without being read, but Pris always gave the author a fair reading. She’d found some good material that way. Why did she take the trouble? Because she had, years ago, received her own share of rejection slips. And it disturbed her every time she hurt an author the same way she’d been hurt.

Pris took a break and walked to the lounge for a coffee refill. Two secretaries were seated at a table, laughing and gossiping. When Pris entered the small room, the two young women stopped laughing, but their eyes were still shining with humor.

“Good afternoon, Miss Carey.”

“Good afternoon, girls,” she said toward them, and then concentrated on filling her cup. They most likely had been discussing men, and her presence made them nervous. Pris felt like an old maid schoolteacher around them. She relieved their tension by going back to her office.

Pris sighed. Same old office. Didn’t those girls realize she wasn’t frumpy and dowdy on the inside? Pris had a rich interior life populated by the stories she read. She couldn’t create a character. But once she had read about them in someone else’s story, they were hers forever.
Pris was good at what she did. She could point out others’ writing errors and polish a story for publication. But she’d gladly chuck her talent if she could only create people on paper. If only she could make them live!

But she couldn’t, and that was that.

With a sigh, she sat down and picked up another story.

Crushed by tragedy, we were
AFRAID TO LOVE EACH OTHER

I walked away from my husband’s freshly filled grave determined to make something of myself. I know that isn’t the normal reaction for a woman in grief, but I wasn’t the typical widow. For one thing, I was young, barely twenty-four. For another, it’d been less than a month since I’d discovered that Andy had been having an affair. And true to the proverb, the wife had nearly been the last to find out.

When my brother Frank heard the gossip, he wanted to kill Andy with his bare hands. Frank felt betrayed, too, because he considered Andy to be the brother he’d never had. Frank and Andy were also partners in the lumber company we’d inherited from our father. Andy said he’d been romancing Sylvia Baxter so she’d influence her husband to buy lumber from us to build his houses. The story must’ve sounded phony to Mr. Baxter, too, because he plowed his car into Andy’s and killed both of them, leaving Sylvia without a husband or a lover. Poor Sylvia, losing both of them! All I’d lost had been a marriage and my pride. Apparently, my husband hadn’t been mine to lose.

Three years before, Andy Walton had shown up at our yards with a load of lumber from the mountains. His sparkling blue eyes and easy grin captured my heart almost immediately. And wonder of wonders, he seemed intrigued with me! I’d never dated much in high school, and after business college I worked as a secretary and bookkeeper for my father. Nobody in my hometown of Myrtle Cove, Oregon, seemed too interested in me until Andy appeared. But in a matter of weeks he was working for my father and I was married to him.

I was a virgin and on my wedding night I guessed that Andy wasn’t. But that didn’t bother me. In my conservative hometown, we were the typical couple: the groom was experienced and the bride wasn’t.

After a few months we moved into our own house and started making payments on it. We also gathered some essential pieces of traditional maple furniture. It was made sturdy, Andy said, so our babies wouldn’t tear it up. He winked, and I blushed to my toes.

We put off having children for awhile, but after nearly three years I became desperate to start a family. After seven months of disappointing tries, we consulted a doctor and learned to our dismay that Andy was infertile. He’d been injured in a logging accident and apparently sterilized in the treatment. Since Andy had been checked first, Doc Jenkins didn’t even bother examining me. Why close the barn door after the horse has run away, Doc asked.

I was stunned, but Andy’s reaction sickened me. He began seeing any woman who’d go out with him. Nobody could pin anything on him anyway, he said. I was terribly humiliated, but I knew Andy’s pain was worse because his male ego had been crushed. Luckily that phase passed quickly, and he settled down. Whatever news my family heard about Andy’s escapades probably seemed like curious gossip. He and I were still the ideal couple.

But something was dead with our relationship. We still made love, but it became a mechanical procedure for both of us. Neither of us was content in our minds or our hearts, but we could live
together. The honeymoon was over, and reality had set in with nothing but a dull future ahead for us. I sighed to myself. This was what the rest of my life was going to be. No children would ever be born to us, so why work toward a future. For what? For what end?

And then the double explosions of Andy’s affair and his death overwhelmed me. I suppose I was in shock but I wanted to rid myself of the past. I sold the house and the wonderful Colonial furniture. All of Andy’s clothes were given to charity. His hunting rifles went to his buddies. But my brother Frank wouldn’t take one. Like me, he wanted no part of Andy left. The wound would take a long time to heal in both of us. For as much as Frank had loved Andy, he loved his sister more. And the humiliation and shame I suffered could never be forgotten by Frank or by me.

I wanted to leave town, but my mother discouraged it until she found me cutting up my wedding gown.

“Sarah, what have you done to your lovely dress?! It’s ruined!”

“Oh, Mama, I always wanted our daughter to wear it. Now there won’t be any daughter.”

“But, darling, your dress—”

“It was a symbol, Mama. A symbol of our mutual love. Love! Ha!”

“But, darling, you could’ve always adopted.”

“No having babies isn’t what destroyed our marriage, Mama! There never was a marriage.”

“Sarah!”

“Not a real marriage, Mama. It must’ve been fascination for both of us.” I smiled crookedly. “Or maybe just for me. For him, maybe it was an easy way to become a partner in a good business. Did Papa buy me a husband, Mama?”

“Sarah Mae!”

“Whether he did or not doesn’t matter now. This chapter of my life is over, and I want to try something new. Mama, you need to understand. I NEED to try something new.”

“Yes, perhaps you’re right,” she said thoughtfully. “You need to go somewhere to work your problems out. I can’t help you anymore. I never faced anything like this. Your papa was always true to me.”

I squeezed her hand. I knew she was befuddled by my predicament. “I’m glad Papa was so good to you and that he won your faith. But as for me, I’ll never trust a man romantically again.”

She looked pained, but kept her lips tightly shut.

I drove down the coast to Northern California and found a secretarial job in a city considerably larger than my hometown. I enjoyed the anonymity of the city, but my evenings were crushingly lonely. A nearby church offered sanctuary, but the overly friendly people smothered me and I fled from their clinging hands. Night classes in the local high school were filled with desperate women flirting with the middle-aged teacher. He was an intellectual snob and an oily rump-patter with too many easy choices in his eager harem. The first time he touched me was his last. I never returned to class. I retreated into my quiet apartment and read library books to improve my mind. At least my time was spent in a worthwhile activity.
But however I sliced it, I was lonely and tired of being cooped up in my four walls. When a vacancy in a branch office became available, I snatched it and transferred out of the inner city. I took a cut in salary, but my new environment was friendly and relaxed. It reminded me a lot of my old hometown.

I bought a small cottage in the suburbs and furnished it with a few basic pieces of furniture and the barest amount of linens, dishes, and the other essentials of daily living. Without a husband, I didn’t feel domestic. The house was just a place to live, sleep, eat, and keep my clothing.

And then I met John McNair. I’d been jogging in the park one day, and a sudden shower drenched me as I hurried toward my house. A horn tooted and I recognized the car of a neighbor who lived down the street from me. Although I’d never met him, I felt safe enough as I bailed into his old Chevy.

“Oh! Thank you!” I said as I shook water off myself. “I thought I was going to drown out there!”

“Glad I happened by,” he said softly and shifted his pipe around in his mouth. “Just call me the Shore Patrol on a rescue mission.”

I stopped wiping wet hair out of my face and laughed. He glanced at me with a half-smile, and then concentrated on driving through the heavy rain. I studied him with interest. Ordinary face, thinning hair, probably in his early thirties, with a heavy, dumpy body. He was certainly no catch, but I felt attracted to him. Probably safely married. I craned my neck to see if he wore a wedding band. He did! I relaxed.

He stopped in front of my house, and I hopped out.

“Thanks again!”

“Don’t mention it.”

He drove off and I promptly forgot him.

But then some sort of perverse witchcraft took over. I began to run into my neighbor everywhere. On Saturday we literally collided when our grocery carts tangled at the end of a supermarket aisle. We mumbled apologies and sped away in opposite directions. On Wednesday I pulled a book off the library shelf and saw his profile. I must’ve gasped because he gave me a distressed look and then nodded his head in greeting. But on Friday night, I seated myself at a fund-raising dinner for a local politician and saw to my astonishment that my neighbor was just sitting down at the next table.

The ridiculous coincidences must’ve struck us both funny at once, because we both started laughing.

“I think someone’s trying to tell us something,” he said as he held out his hand. It was soft and pudgy, like he was. Andy’s hand had been so rough from his work. This man did not work with his hands, apparently. “I’m John McNair.”

“And I’m Sarah Walton. Won’t you join me?”

He pulled out a chair and sat down. “I see that you’re a supporter for Mr. Cavendish, also.”

“I really don’t know him. I’m new to the area. But he has an impressive record and he should make a worthwhile addition to the city council.”

“A welcomed one, you mean.”

“Oh?” I asked.
“We have our share of dirty politics on the local level, too. If you feel strongly about Mr. Cavendish, you should campaign actively for him.”

“I’m not that persuasive, but I would like to stuff envelopes.”

“That kind of help is always appreciated and needed.”

I tilted my head at him. “Are you on his staff?”

“I knew him in high school. I’ll be glad to introduce you.”

From then on, I was caught up in election work. It helped to fill the hours when I wasn’t at the office, and I also met new people. One of the workers was a college professor who made night courses at her school sound worthwhile. Another campaigner taught ceramics, and I arranged to take classes with her. My horizons and acquaintances were definitely widening.

And John McNair was always in the background. We became quite good friends, and with his encouragement, I began campaigning by phone. I was thrilled when the people I called sounded interested in my candidate. Maybe I was persuasive, after all!

Several of us were eating a late snack at campaign headquarters one evening when I said to John, “Your wife must be awfully tolerant of the time you spend down here.”

John jerked and the table quieted. “Yeah,” he mumbled, and then went on chewing his sandwich. A few moments later he went after a coffee refill.

Judy, the ceramics teacher, slid toward me and hissed in my ear, “John’s wife is dead!”

I gasped. “Oh, I didn’t know! Oh, I’m sorry.”

“It’s been over three years now. She died in childbirth.”

“Oh, how terrible! That poor man!”

Judy straightened up. “He’s coming back.”

But the wedding ring! My mind whirled. John was living with a ghost, and I had painfully reminded him of the tragedy of her death.

When I got the chance, I apologized for hurting him.

“You had no way of knowing, Sarah. I should’ve told you sooner. That way you wouldn’t have been so embarrassed the other night. It’s still hard for me to accept that Joyce is truly gone.”

I patted his arm. “I’m a widow myself. I know the loneliness.”

He gave me a weak smile. “At least you can understand. Thanks, Sarah. It helps.”

I couldn’t bring myself to tell him I grieved for my husband in another way.

John and I drew closer together. He felt we had a common bond, and I needed friendship. He picked me up on nights we helped campaign, and I even invited him over for a shrimp dinner. He was an accountant and worked a lot at home, so he welcomed our little excursions together.

One of our favorite places was the city zoo. We loved to take picnic lunches and eat on the grounds. Then we visited the animals and got to feeling that we were part of the animal families, too. The day
one of the tiger cubs died, we felt like we had lost a family member.

Another activity we enjoyed was dancing. We found a small club that featured rock-and-roll music, and we made that our special hangout. Other couples who loved that kind of music were friendly, and we soon became part of the group. Several couples also liked to play cards, so we met with them to play pitch.

We shared an interest in new movies and old art which caused us to haunt movie theaters and art galleries. Any new exhibit at a museum excited us as much the upcoming Academy Awards, and both caused a lot of discussion and good-natured disagreement between us. We were both thrilled that we had found someone who enjoyed our interests.

John and I were dating without it ever officially being called dating. We were simply spending time together and providing each other with an escort. Single people are social pariahs. They cause trouble to hostesses who do not want an uneven number of dinner guests. They are pitied, or worse yet, objects of married people’s matchmaking skills. At least the relationship between John and me saved us from that humiliation. We were an ‘item.’

But that’s all we were. John never made a pass at me nor even hinted at it to see if I approved. We were best pals.

The night of the election, we stayed up late to learn if our candidate Lloyd Cavendish had won a seat on the city council. It was a squeaker, but Cavendish finally pulled it off.

Election headquarters went wild. Everyone was yelling and kissing and hugging. It was only natural that I grabbed John and planted a big whopper on his mouth.

John stared at me, and then walked away.

“Huh? What did you say, Judy?” I asked my ceramics teacher.

“Come, have some champagne! The party’s just starting! Where’s John? He has to celebrate, too.”

But John had apparently left. We didn’t see him the rest of the evening.

Nor did I see John in the days that followed. I had the impression he was avoiding me, and then one day he deliberately walked down another aisle in the grocery store to avoid meeting me face to face.

“McNair residence.”

“John, this is Sarah.” I heard his slight intake of breath and felt the chill coming over the telephone. “How have you been?”

“Fine, thank you.” A pause. “And you?”

“I’ve been puzzled, John. I’ve been wandering why my friend has been avoiding me. Because, John, you have been. What’s the matter? Did I do something wrong?”

He exhaled noisily. “Not really.”

“Then let’s let bygones be bygones and continue with our friendship. I’ve got a port roast and sweet potatoes baking in the oven, and an apple pie is cooling on the counter. I’ve got some asparagus so tender you won’t believe it. It’ll take me only a few minutes to steam. Come over and we’ll wreck havoc on this grub.”
“I’m sorry, Sarah, I can’t.”

“Why not? You know I’m a good cook. There’s not a cloud in the sky, so you won’t get stranded over here because of rain. How about if I promise not to grab you and kiss you again? Will you feel comfortable then?”

“All right, I’ll be over.”

“Hey, cheer up. You’re not facing a firing squad, you know. Just a friend who’s cooked up too much dinner and wants to share it.”

I’d tried to be glib on the phone, and I kept it up during dinner. Ordinarily, I wasn’t a witty talker but somehow everything I said seemed clever. John was usually quiet, and that not only made me more nervous but more talkative.

Soon after the dishes were done, John said he had to be leaving. I followed him to the door, still talking. He turned to say goodbye, and I reached up and kissed him.

“I’m fickle when I come to keeping promises,” I said lamely to his amazed face.

He took my arm and led me to a chair. “Sit down. You deserve an explanation.” He debated with himself for several moments, and then looked at me. “I think a lot of you, Sarah. It’s always nice when two lonely people get together.”

“Then why--”

He held up his hand for silence. “Hear me out. You’d want children, and I can’t go through that again. One woman died because of me, and I won’t kill the second.”

“That doesn’t mean I’d die.”

“But I couldn’t go through it again. Don’t you understand? You lost someone you loved. You surely remember how devastating that was.”

He had no way of knowing that my feelings at Andy’s funeral were nothing like the feelings he’d had at his wife’s.

“I wouldn’t need to have children.”

“It’s every woman’s right. You’d get bitter and wind up hating me.”

“We could adopt. And there’s ways to prevent accidents. You could have a vasectomy.”

“But I don’t want to deprive you, a perfectly healthy person, of having a child. I don’t care if I don’t reproduce because I’ve got this hang-up.” He came over to my chair and caressed my face with his hand. “I think too much of you to put you through all that.”

“I was hoping you loved me,” I said softly.

Pain clouded his eyes. “If only you knew how much.”

“John--”

He held up his hand. “Don’t. Please. Don’t. I can see in your eyes what you’re feeling. I wish that love was enough for us.” He frowned. “I have to be going. No, don’t get up. I’ll let myself out. It’s best if we don’t see each other again.”
He left and I sat there for a long time with thoughts whirling around in my head. I finally had found a man I could marry, but a seemingly impossible problem faced us. Generally, the prospect of children brought a couple more together. This time, it was the concept that was keeping us apart.

I needed a change, so I took my vacation and drove north back to Myrtle Cove to see my family. It had been many months since I’d been home. I’d once ran from it with a problem, now I was fleeing to it with a different perplexity. I wasn’t really running, I told myself. I was just getting a different perspective.

My old room at Mom’s house hadn’t changed, and it felt good to be back in it again. Mom fussed over me, making all of my favorite dishes. And it was good seeing my brother Frank and his three children. At least he and his wife Lorene could give Mom grandchildren.

“Sarah, there’s something I need to tell you, dear,” Mom said over a second cup of coffee one morning. She was being very cautious, as though her subject was extremely delicate. “If you stay here in Myrtle Cove very long, you’ll learn about it anyway. Better that you hear it from me so you won’t be so shocked to learn it by accident.” She sipped at her coffee quickly. “Sylvia Baxter has a baby boy. She says he belongs to Andy.”

“That’s impossible!”

“She’s very adamant about it, dear.”

And Sylvia was, when I called on her. And she had good reason. The baby was asleep, but he certainly had Andy’s features.

My next stop was Doc Jenkins’s office. Sure enough, tests proved that I was sterile. I remembered having had an infection about the time I began having periods as a teenager. Doc Jenkins figured I had been sterile ever since. Andy’s condition had apparently corrected itself. Poor Andy! He died without knowing he could father children.

Then the thought hit me. I couldn’t have children! There was nothing stopping John and me now.

My heart was singing as I drove south, toward home.

John and I have been married over five years now. We’ve got a lovely four-year-old daughter whom we adopted. Lately, we’ve been saying she needs a little brother. And who knows? There might well be other babies in our future. After all, we both have a great capacity to love. We had to wait long enough to prove it, and nothing is stopping us now!

THE END

Pris set the manuscript aside and frowned in thought. Sylvia Baxter. Hadn’t she known a Sylvia Baxter at Vassar? Or was that the name of the girl her brother Richard had dated when he was stationed in San Diego?

Pris concentrated for a few moments about the name, and then tossed the pencil aside. What the hell difference did it make who had been Sylvia Baxter? Both girls were out of her life now.

Just like David was. David, the sweet young man she could have married thirty years ago when they had both been bright-eyed and naive. The last she’d heard about David was that his third son was getting married soon in Connecticut. David himself had married a laughing, big-boned brood mare who’d given him seven children. It was a good thing that he was a corporation lawyer. It’d take a lot
of money to send seven children through Harvard. But David was well on his way to doing just that.

Pris sighed as she pulled a brochure out of her desk drawer. The Bahamas. She supposed she’d go there again for her two-week vacation this year. Heaven knew she could afford it. She spent little money on clothing. Why spend money on something she didn’t need? Who saw her, for heaven’s sake? What man did she have to impress?

Pris picked up the manuscript again. This one had a chance upstairs. Good. We writers have to stick together, didn’t we? WE writers. That made her laugh.

Her evening would be spent curled up on the sofa in her apartment with either a torrid romance or a whodunit. Her reading at night was sort of a busman’s holiday, but television held little interest for her. And she never went out. NEVER!

Oh, yes, she did. Richard and Judith had her over for dinner every other Thursday. She and several other unattached career women occasionally took in a movie or ate dinner out. Once the group had even participated in a weekend jaunt to Cape Cod, but it hadn’t work out because all of the women were used to their own routines. That’s what happened when a person is middle aged and lived by herself.

The Bahamas. Again?

Why not do something different? Why not Rome? Rome?! Hey, Pris, let’s not get carried away here! Breaking out of a routine is one thing, but let’s not shatter your lifestyle all to hell!

Well, there’s other places one could go, if Rome seemed too foreign and daring. Some place closer, yet out of view of the New York City skyline. Some place flat.

Why not St. Louis? That was flat.

Why in the hell pick St. Louis?

Why in the hell not?!

Well, why St. Louis?

Well, she sheepishly admitted to herself, it was the first place that popped into my mind.

Whoa! Wait a minute here! You don’t do anything impulsively.

There’s a first time for everything. And I’m going to do it. Yes, I am, just for the hell of it. St. Louis, here I come! I feel the fresh air of adventure on my face.

You feel your temperature rising because you probably picked up a flu germ in the department store yesterday. I said not to go in there. Too many people. Remember that snotty nosed kid near the elevator? I said that kid was contagious.

You said. You said. Shut up, Conscience. I’m going on an adventure to St. Louis!

Oh, boy, I might as well break out the antacid tablets. We’re about to do something stupid.

Adventuresome!

Stupid.

Aw, shut up! You’re probably right, but we’re going anyway. St. Louis, Missouri, here I come!
Pris traveled to St. Louis by Amtrak. The constantly changing scene out of the train window managed to maintain the feeling of adventure for her. She sensed that if she could place herself in a foreign situation, she could be forced by circumstance to pump excitement into her humdrum life.

But in a few dreary days’ time, St. Louis had grown tarnished to Pris. It was probably cosmopolitan and chic to someone from a small town. But to someone from New York City, it seemed provincial.

But Pris was determined to enjoy herself. She attended a Cardinals game, toured Busch gardens, and took a riverboat excursion on the Mississippi River. She window-shopped, but decided that the stores were months behind on style. A few boutiques did manage to be up-to-date, but the clothes had huge price tags on them and were so faddish they would pass out of usage long before their prices warranted.

Pris stood on a street corner in St. Louis one afternoon waiting for the light to change. She was getting pretty tired of this town. This was the second straight day of rain and fog off the river. What a dreary day for spring!

Rain had been heavier earlier in the afternoon, but had dwindled to a chilly mist now. Pris was glad she was wearing a raincoat. Two other women standing beside her were also shrouded in rain gear. The three would look like triplets in their long beige coats, except Pris’s garment was older and had more body to cover. The woman on her left was elderly and had pain and crankiness written on her face. The woman on Pris’s far right was bewitchingly beautiful. She wasn’t pretty, but striking in an exotic and foreign looking way. A face like that etched itself in memory and stayed with someone forever. Pris had seen that woman somewhere before. On television? In movies? Or did she just look like someone who should be in show business?

Pris was a people watcher. Although from the city and seemingly indifferent to strangers, she studied the flow of humanity she constantly met. She didn’t make up stories about them. If she could, then she could write. A writer acquaintance of hers had once told her that imagination wasn’t the main problem. The writer could see and hear story characters in her mind. She could watch them move about and knew how they would express themselves in words and actions. She even experienced the feelings of the characters and knew how characters reacted to each other. The trick was getting it down on paper so clearly and simply that someone else reading the piece cold could share the author’s experience.

Pris wished she could claim the abilities that her writer friend took for granted. Pris sensed that her lack of empathy prevented her from writing. Her mechanical skill with language was highly polished, but what worth was that ability if she could not pump life into her characters?

Pris frowned. That cantankerous looking old woman beside her might have more native skill in creating characters than she did and not care a hoot about her talent.

It wasn’t fair, Pris thought bitterly. Why was it ordained that the people who admired a talent the most were sometimes prevented from possessing that talent? She’d seen some people touched by genius act almost blasé about their skills. And worse still were the artists who did not appreciate the admiration of their fans. Had they no idea of how they were envied? Had they no idea of how many fans would gladly trade places with them? The fans wouldn’t be blasé. No, siree!

But her mind was drifting and there were several other women standing with her. She had a moment before the light changed. She could study them, also.
If Pris shifted her head slightly to the right, she could see a woman behind her right arm who had to be in her late twenties and looked every year of it, too. She had cheap country written all over her from her inappropriate clothing to her elaborate makeup. Nashville, after all, wasn’t that far away. And to Pris, Nashville was about as cheap and corny as a person could get.

Cheap Country, as Pris immediately dubbed the woman, seemed deep in thought. And her thoughts weren’t agreeing with her, if the sour look on her face was any indication. Harsh lines marred her complexion. Cheap Country must’ve seen too many hard nights and not enough pleasant days. She had a determined severity about her that made Pris think that Cheap Country could get along just fine driving trucks or pushing steers to market. And her floozy clothing had a down-home look in the crudest way possible. That red-checked dress with its exposed chest was more appropriate on the stage of the Grand Ol’ Opry than on a city street.

That inappropriate looking person was far outshone by the polished young woman standing in front of the elderly woman. In her early twenties, City Chic (as she was instantly dubbed by Pris) had a pulled together appearance suited for this cosmopolitan street and yet she was not overdone. Navy blazer over paisley dress. British tan shoulder bag. Pris bet she wore walking heels of the same color as the bag. Gold love-knot earrings in pierced ears. Hair pulled back in a simple bun. City Chic’s hair impressed Pris the most. Healthy, full of life that would bounce when released, but was now wound and controlled. Just the opposite of Pris’s stringy bun. City Chic’s hair impressed Pris the most. Healthy, full of life that would bounce when released, but was now wound and controlled. Just the opposite of Pris’s stringy bun. Pris put up her left hand to touch her hair as the light finally changed. She would’ve been amazed to learn that Barbara Crider (or City Chic, as Pris called her) had once looked trashier than Cheap Country.

A girl in her teens stood in front of the old girl in the red-checked dress straight off some mountain farmstead. The youngster had naive small town written all over her, too. She gazed at the tall buildings, and then wrinkled her brow as if looking for something in particular. She’d better wake up, or she’d get run over, Pris thought. City cars took no prisoners.

City Chic stepped into the street as the light changed, and the crowd moved forward. Pris stepped left to get around the star-gazing girl and jostled the arm of the sour old woman who dropped her purse. Pris knew that she should apologize and retrieve the purse for the old woman, but this was the city. Everyone was on his own here. Thy Brother’s Keeper stopped at the city limits.

Cheap Country moved around the exotic, foreign-looking woman who seemed to be having trouble walking. Of course! Those high-heels probably offered little traction on the slippery street surface. Cheap Country brushed past the teenager who seemed to wake up as Cheap Country touched the girl’s arm.

Five of the women were out in the street now. Cars and city pedestrians flowed with or against the direction of the women. Pris saw City Chic gain the curb and march toward a telephone booth. Cheap Country was right behind City Chic.

Pris had to hurry. The stop light would change to yellow at any second, and stale lights were dangerous. Too many drivers jumped red lights.

The air was filled with wild honking and screeching tires. Pris looked around. What was wrong? What was happening? The car sounded closer. People on the sidewalk were stopping to determine the problem.

Then Pris saw the car, a blur really, careening toward her. She bolted for the curb. The exotic woman and the teenage girl jerked as though they had been shocked with electricity. There was a rush forward, but Pris knew that only a miracle would save them.

Pris made a desperate leap for the curb and heard metal strike something solidly. The air off the
passing car brushed her backside as she threw her arms around a street post. Papers rained down on her, and she screwed her eyes tightly shut to close out the scene of horror that she knew had to be going on behind her. Those papers had belonged to the person who’d been struck by the car. The fluttering papers seemed to accuse Pris of not helping their owner.

But Pris was alive! Thank God she was alive!

But the horror! The near hit! My God!

She began sobbing and didn’t notice the flashbulb in her face.

It wasn’t until hours later that Pris learned that the victim had been the exotic, foreign-looking woman who’d looked familiar to Pris. The victim was the wife of a famous Hollywood actor. Melana Clerke-Jones, wife of Sean Murphy, was dead. No wonder the exotic woman had looked familiar. Pris had seen her on television less than a month ago when her husband had received the Life Achievement Award. How Pris had admired and envied Melana then! Now Pris was just happy to be alive. She felt guilty, but very lucky.

Pris lay in the hospital bed and studied her own picture in the evening newspaper. There she stood, hugging a street post and sobbing with her mouth open. She barely recognized herself, but she understood that her horror reflected the feelings of people reading about the tragedy.

Police had talked to her and to City Chic and Cheap Country. In fact, Cheap Country had been very soothing and helpful to Pris. Pris had to admit that a caring heart can sometimes beat beneath a rough exterior.

The three women could add little information to the police. Nobody had been paying that much attention to their fellow pedestrians, except for Pris. She’d been the one studying the others. She told of the old woman left on the curb, and the police said they had found a woman of her description babbling hysterically on the far corner.

The police asked Pris about a teenage girl seen running from the scene, and Pris told them of her impressions that the girl was green from the country. When asked for any solid details, however, Pris could come up with very little. The girl, after all, had been in front of her. Only when Pris had moved around her did she ever see any of the girl’s face, and that view was interrupted by Pris jostling the arm of the elderly woman and causing her to drop her purse.

“There was one thing about the girl, though,” Pris told the policeman.

“What was that, ma’am?”

“She had lady bugs in her ears.”

“What?” the policeman barked.

“She was wearing earrings shaped like lady bugs. She had pierced ears. I saw the left ear very clearly as I squeezed past her. I assume the right ear contained a similar earring.”

Pris was aggravated with herself that she had noticed so few details about the girl. The police had to find the teenager to make sure she wasn’t injured, but that seemed like an impossible task for them.

Pris understood that Sean Murphy flew to St. Louis to escort his wife’s body back to California. His older son Stephen accompanied him. The police tried to prevent crowds, but Murphy’s grief was
Funeral services in California were private, but duly reported by gossip magazines. Murphy requested that Miles Paxton Hughes write and deliver a eulogy. Hughes complied, although he was visibly shaken at the services.

Miles spoke of Melana’s unique character and free spirit. Life to her had been an interesting challenge, he said. Hughes thought that was the way she’d faced Death, too. His closing words were widely quoted:

“Do not weep if I be dead;
You know in life I would not have that.
I am content, I am at peace now.
For me the battle ceased
And I but marched to another victory.
Do not weep for me
For I am smiling.”

Miles’s letter of condolence was even more touching. But, of course, only Miles and Sean ever knew its contents:

Sean, Miles wrote, I know you’ve wondered about my silence. I needed time to think. And I know that you needed time to collect your thoughts, too. So much has been happening. So many people have clamored around you. But still, when it’s quiet, you may feel alone.

Please don’t feel all alone. If earthly possible, I will always be near. If you need someone to talk to, to sit and watch the sunset with, to walk across the desert with, I’ll be there. I may not be able to make grandiose promises as others may have, but I offer simple things such as companionship and compassion. Others may have offered you the world, but I pledge the only thing I truly own, myself. Lean on me, big guy. I’ll always be there for you.

You and I have a special friendship, Sean, just as you and Melana did. Every relationship is unique. That’s because relationships continue to grow, to expand, and to change, just as the people involved do. There may be times, even now or in the future, when one of us doesn’t like the other very much. One person can’t please someone else all the time. But let’s always be willing to work on our relationship. Let’s keep it fresh. You are important to me, and I want to be important in your life.

Many factors will change in our lives, but our friendship can stay rock-solid. I need you to be my friend, big guy. And I need you to need me now. So don’t hesitate. I’m here.

Now that the activity has quieted down and the people have gone home, you have the time to sit quietly and contemplate what has happened to you and Melana. To me, it is just a phase of your partnership together. Melana has simply gone ahead and will be waiting for you to join her someday. Even if you found someone else to share some earthly time with, a part of you would always belong to Melana. We never completely belong to only one person. Parts of us belong to each of our friends. And you have many friends. I’m proud to be one of them. Let me always be a part of you. Let me always be your Pax.

Sean was thankful that Pax wasn’t near when Sean first read the letter. Although Sean trusted Pax, guys just didn’t bawl in front of each other. Guys kept their dignity.

One magazine obtained and printed a copy of the letter of condolence that Miles had sent to Murphy a week after the funeral. But the letter was so heartfelt that even the worldly magazine editors felt embarrassed for printing it. At first, it was a scoop. But in retrospect, it was like spying on the
nakedness of some innocent child. Decency had been corrupted. The magazine editors didn’t feel smug, just dirty. One was even ashamed to face his mother. For once, seasoned journalists felt they had gone too far with “the public’s right to know.” They hoped to kick dirt over their blunder without too much uproar from their readers. Privacy had indeed been violated.

Readers were shocked with what they read, but they continued to read. Magazines sold and would continue to sell. Such is life.

When Pris read Miles’ sentimental letter, she grumbled. Even he could write, and she couldn’t. It wasn’t fair that he was a talented actor and could write, too! Talent should be passed around more evenly.

In her bitterness, she would’ve been surprised to learn that she had many qualities Miles could envy. He was too naive, too open, and too trusting. He wouldn’t believe that people had a dark side to their personalities and that people would deliberately hurt him. Pris could judge people better. Her eyes were clearer, if not downright suspicious. Miles needed her toughness to temper his romantic nature. She needed his sweetness so she could relax and enjoy life.

Each could have learned a great deal from the other. Each could profit from a relationship together. But they had never met. Chances were, they never would.

Miles always wondered about the letter he sent to Sean. He knew that a small part of it had not been published. Years later, when sifting through Sean’s worn leather wallet after his death, Miles found a folded piece of paper behind Melana’s picture. He unfolded it and once again read words that apparently only he and Sean had ever seen:

You will smile again,
But it will not seem as bright;
You will laugh again,
But it will not seem as light.
For you must bear a grief
That no one else can claim.
You may love again,
But it will not feel the same.

It’d been a month since Miles had lost Sean. Now he realized he’d written the words for himself now as much as for Sean after Melana’s death.

He refolded the paper and placed it in his own billfold. The poem would be with him always.

If Pris had known of the existence of the small note, she would’ve envied Miles all the more.

Pris’s exit from St. Louis was much quieter than Sean Murphy’s had been. Her brother Richard and his wife Judith flew out and escorted her home. She went back to her dreary apartment and figured that was that. She’d rest a few days, go back to work, and save the remainder of her vacation until later. Then she could grab a tour to the Bahamas. Again.

But she had become something of a celebrity. The picture of her clinging to the steel post went international. An entertainer from New York City invited her to his talk show where she gave thorough descriptions of the moments immediately preceding the change of the traffic light. People
were fascinated with her recall and impressions. She could not weave fanciful stories, but she could report accurately.

The New York Times asked her to write an article for its Sunday magazine. She agonized over the story, but the actual project was simply a chronological re-stating of facts. She began to wonder if she should have majored in journalism in college.

A reporter at the Times flirted with her, and she accepted his offer to go out for coffee. He was probably married to some trusting woman in the suburbs. But that didn’t seem to matter to Pris. All of this sudden attention was unnatural to her. None of what was happening to her was real. Soon the merry-go-round would stop, and she’d go back to her old world. She might as well get as much out of this experience as possible.

Pris accepted the weekend date with the reporter, and they went up to a small resort in Connecticut. He’d told his wife he had to cover a story up there. Pris didn’t mind what kind of liar he was. All she wanted from him was what a weekend with him would provide to her: experience. She knew she was nothing more than a lark to him, and she really didn’t care. He was using her, but she was also using him. They each were gaining something, and nobody was getting hurt, except for his wife in the suburbs. And that poor, dumb bitch was none of Pris’s concern. It was Pris’s turn at last to live a little.

When Pris opened the door to her office on Monday morning, it was the first time in two weeks that the world felt normal. At last she could feel sorry for that poor woman who’d been killed in St. Louis and for her own brush with Death. She sat down at her desk and wept. When she finished, she didn’t feel absolved, only empty. For the first time since menopause had occurred, she felt old and headed for death.

Her co-workers eyed her cautiously. Never friendly, they regarded her as some curiosity who’d grown stale with familiarity and now had burst forth from her chrysalis into some hybrid creature that they neither recognized nor would permit in their midst. Notoriety had not paved her way into finally being accepted.

The editors had viewed her a little differently, though. She’d made herself known to them, and they decided that she needed a promotion. A small amount had been added to her pay check, but the real change came in the better quality of story she was to edit.

She stared at the manuscript before her. It was more intellectual. She could tell just from the title.

VERA, ACROSS FOREVER

Every time she walked the little dog near the golf course and passed the old house at the end of the third fairway, she imagined that a hatchet-faced woman was staring at her with sharp, black eyes from behind the lace curtains in the parlor. Of course, in this present time, two bachelor brothers lived in the small frame house, and flowered drapes covered that same window which now faced a television set. But years before, in the last century, heavy wooden rockers crowded the unpleasant parlor. And a haunted woman watched with hungry eyes for someone who would never return.

Vera was the name of the ghost, or at least the name assigned to her by the dog walker. Vera kept house for her husband and two teenage sons. The men farmed and were content to work the land. But not Vera. The Indian blood coursed hotly in her veins and offered her little peace.

Once the small woman had been young and vivacious with her laughing black eyes and alluring with her small body. She charmed the hulking blonde German farm boy and married him. Their sons inherited Ben’s immense size and Vera’s dark coloring. Only their daughter Virginia kept Ben’s
blonde hair and Vera’s small size.

Virginia was Vera’s special joy; and when Virginia died shortly before her wedding day, Vera’s joy died with her. Ben and the boys had the farm, but Vera found no consolation, not even with the work that became an obsession to Vera. She gardened and canned more food than even the family’s big appetites needed. Nothing eased her haunting pain, and she became a crabby old woman with a bitter look on her face.

Some said her spirit walked the frame house even now, so many years later. Some said that Vera’s spirit could be felt in the old house, particularly near that parlor window. The dog walker felt it was more than the suggestion of the local legend that convinced her of its truth. She felt that Vera was still in her old home.

Pris tossed the manuscript aside. This story might have higher quality than the confession stories she’d spent years reading, but she needed no ghost tales now.

She sat absently drumming her pencil on the desk blotter. She realized that she missed her confession stories. They were a part of her life. Perhaps she needed to go back to editing them again.

Pris pushed out of her chair and stared out of the same window down onto the same street that she’d studied for years. At least this scene looked familiar. No, wait, there was a different name on the furniture company across the street. And there was a shoeshine stand that she’d never seen before. She sighed. Everything changed. Years from now, would someone feel her ghost at this window as the dog walker had felt Vera’s shade in that story?

Pris had changed and, yet, remained the same. She had finally alleviated her ‘virgin condition’ with ‘experience.’ And, for a few days, people had acknowledged her presence. For a few days, she had been someone. And for one shattering moment, she had faced Death. Frightened and horrified as she’d felt, she’d also known that adventure had touched her life. It might never enter her life again, but for that instant, she had shared feelings with men in combat, motorcycle racers, or anyone who lived with danger. She’d always have that moment in St. Louis, a moment she had faced Death and lived. She would always have that moment, indeed.

And probably little else. She suspected that all of the important parts of her life would be bracketed with other people’s stories. To live on crumbs and not ever be allowed to fully taste. Such was her lot in life.

Ah, well, she should be grateful for the crumbs. But how beautiful a full taste would have been!

She pursed her lips and felt the wrinkles crowd around her aging mouth. Not long for even crumbs, she thought sagely.

Pris sighed. Where had it all gone? Where does it ever go for the dreamers?

She summoned her waning courage, called her editors, and asked if she could return to editing confession stories. If she couldn’t be courageous, at least she could be comfortable. Some lives are built on a lot less.
Amanda, After

Rachel Fossey shut off her hand mixer, brushed aside a gray lock of her permed hair that had fallen across her forehead, and answered her ringing telephone.

“Hello? Oh, Jeb! Checking on dinner, I guess. Well, I’m about to stick a fudge chocolate cake in the oven. We’ll have the rest of that sweet potato casserole and the leftover chopped greens from last night’s supper. And I’ll fry up a bunch of sausage patties that we can eat with the rest of the cornbread. How does that sound to you?” She smiled. “Well, it sounds good to me, too, darlin’. What’s that? You say you didn’t call about dinner?”

“I said, could you come on down to the jail for a few minutes, Hon?”

“Well, I don’t know. I’m just about ready to put this cake in the oven--”

“Have Clara watch it for you. Besides, you won’t be down here that long. I hope.”

“You sure do sound mysterious this morning, Sheriff.”

“Just hurry, huh?”

“I’m practically there.” She hung up the phone, shoved the cake in the oven, washed her hands, grabbed her purse, and pushed through the swinging door into the living room where a young girl sat curled up in a big chair watching Saturday morning cartoons. “Clara, Grandpa wants me to come down to the jail for a little while. If I’m not back in half an hour, I want you to check the cake in the oven and see if it’s done. Remember how I told you to do that?”

The girl blew a bubble, snapped it, petted the sleeping cat in the chair beside her, and never took her eyes of the television. “See if it’s left the sides of the pan. Stick a toothpick in the center and see if it comes out gooey. Tap it to see if it springs back. If it passes all those test, CAREFULLY, take it out of the oven and set it on the counter on the old towels.”

“That’s right. I’ve got the old towels all laid out. I shouldn’t be too long.” She dug her car keys out of her purse and glanced at the cat beside Clara. “You’ve got Aunt Polly. Where’s Heidi?”

Clara pointed absently. “Asleep on the couch.”

“Good. We don’t want her sneaking outside and getting in the family way. She’s coming in heat soon. Next week, we’ll take her to be introduced to a proper dachshund gentleman. Then we’ll have papered puppies to raise. And to sell,” Rachel noted with satisfaction.

Shoulder length black hair rippled as Clara finally looked at her grandmother. “Charlie Snow wants one of the puppies when they’re weaned.”

“I hope you’ve informed Charlie Snow that any of Heidi’s puppies will cost money. These pups won’t be giveaways. Heidi is from good stock.”

“Sometimes I think Heidi has a better family background than we do.”

“You’re probably right. She probably does. Too bad humans don’t come with a set of papers explaining their breeding stock. And people selected mates with their minds and not their hearts.”

“And not their pants?”
“Miss Clara! Mind your mouth! Don’t let your Grandpa hear you talking that way!”

“Why? I’m sure that Grandpa knows where babies come from by now.”

“He does, but he doesn’t want to hear about it from you. That’s just some of those unspoken truths that men don’t want to realize about their womenfolk. You’re his sweet little granddaughter.”

Clara rolled her eyes.

“And to him, you always will be. Now, remember, if you get scared while I’m gone, go on over to Pam Morgan’s house.”

“Oh, Grandma!”

“I know. You’re a big girl. But humor me, Huh?”

“Okay. I promise, if I get scared, I’ll go over to Mrs. Morgan’s.”

“And watch the cake.”

Clara did not want to confuse Rachel with logic, but how could Clara watch the cake if she went next door? There were so many rules with grandparents! And so many of the interactions with them did not make any sense, but c’est la vie, that’s life, as the French say. “I’ll watch the cake.”

“Thank you, Miss Clara,” Rachel said as she stepped out the front door.

Clara rolled her eyes skyward. Honestly! Sometimes Grandma treated her like she was a little girl yet! And she was eleven, for heaven’s sake! And on her own. Well, practically. If you didn’t count Grandpa and Grandma.

Rachel parked her old Charger across the street from the county jail. Being the wife of an Arkansas sheriff wasn’t the most luxurious living possible, Rachel thought as she pushed her shoulder against the stubborn car door that liked to test her patience by sticking. Sometimes the heater refused to work, too. And, occasionally, the windshield wiper startled Rachel with a solitary, unbidden sweep across her line of vision when she hadn’t asked for any effort from them.

But even with all of the car’s annoying quirks, Rachel and Jeb had been lucky to buy it so cheaply at an auction of confiscated belongings three years ago. Now Rachel wished they could get a late model Cadillac the same way, one with low mileage and a price tag to match.

But enough of wishful thinking. Hadn’t her mother warned her and warned her and WARNED her that marriage to Jeb Stuart Fossey would never be easy? Hadn’t Mama said that money would always be a problem? That Rachel would have to hide her envy when other women spent money? For Rachel’s mother had known her pretty daughter and her pleasure-loving ways. But Rachel had been in love with Jeb, so in love that she hadn’t listened. Wouldn’t listen. Practical in so many other ways, she’d been blinded by love. Maybe that’s why she could understand when her own daughter Noreen had turned wild and presented her parents with a grandchild before she was safely married. Jeb had been hurt by Noreen’s behavior, but Rachel understood that sometimes there just isn’t any logic to love.

And now Rachel hid her envy when other women spent money, just as her mother had predicted she’d have to do. She drove the old Charger and pretended to be indifferent to new vehicles. She was raising her young granddaughter so that her own daughter could have a few more years of
youth. Jeb collected strays because his heart was so tender to other people’s dilemmas, but it was Rachel who understood the sacrifice of love and practiced it daily. It was Rachel who understood the strength in the seeming weakness that love can create in a person. Jeb could be an old puddin’, acting as though he could be manipulated, when he was supposed to be a stern lawman. But Rachel knew he was acting out of love for others, and for that she could forgive him of almost anything.

Rachel pulled herself out of the Charger and slammed the creaking door. Her own bones were beginning to creak, too, and she felt a certain empathy for the car. She mentally prodded herself. Better get across the street because Jeb was waiting. She wondered what crisis was up now.

Rachel thought about her mother and Jeb as she crossed the street. Her mother had been right. Life with Jeb hadn’t always been easy. Sometimes she suspected him of having a roving eye. Sometimes the money just wasn’t there for essentials, let alone the luxuries her mother was right in knowing she’d miss. And something about Jeb attracted misfits to him, everything from homeless dogs to stray people. The strays knew what Rachel knew, Jeb was kindhearted. He couldn’t turn down any plea for help. She knew he really suffered sometimes being a sheriff. Unfortunate stories really touched him. But criminals were another matter. He loathed wrong-doing and was very literal about the Law. Criminals were lucky Jeb didn’t sit on the bench. As a judge, he would’ve been merciless. As a sheriff, either victims or law-breakers came Jeb’s way. As a lawman, there were no in betweens for him.

Rachel opened the door of the Sheriff’s Office and faced Clementine Russell who was working on reports at the receptionist’s desk.

“Hi, Clem. I have been summoned.”

Clementine smiled. “Hi, Rach. You can go on back.” The two middle-aged women had been teenagers together. Being together now brought back the glow of those days, if only for a few moments.

“Know what’s going on?”

Clementine’s smile faded. “I’d better let Jeb explain it. It’s official business.”

Rachel breathed deeply, and then shook it off. “Don’t forget Betty Lou’s Tupperware party tomorrow night.”

Clementine smiled again. “Wouldn’t miss it. I’m ready for a night with just us girls.”

They’d been around ‘Official Business’ for so long that it failed to impress them for very long.

“See you then.” Rachel ducked into another door.

Clementine smiled after her, then busied herself with her typing. Clementine hated her name. She cringed every time she heard it. She supposed her mother had thought herself clever to hang such a unique name on an innocent little baby. Clementine thought it was a monstrosity. Jack, her husband now gone to a better world, had called her ‘Clemmy’ and had done it so lovingly that Clementine felt herself treasured. But it would’ve sounded the same murmured by Jack if her name had been Mary or Woodrow. Jack had a special way about him. A mellow glow had gleamed in his eyes for her. No, this widow would never remarry. She had such wonderful memories of the best, no other man would come anywhere close to her heart. But that damned name, Clementine! Why couldn’t she have been named something decent like her sister Ann? (Once Ann had confessed that she hated her name, too. It was so ordinary, not unique like Clementine’s. Why, it didn’t even have a final ‘e’ on it to dress it up.)
Was anyone ever satisfied with the name given at birth? Look at Rachel’s granddaughter, Clara Brindle. Clementine bet Clara was ready to sock somebody for the gift of THAT name.

Rachel saw Jeb first. He was seated at his desk, staring out the window. She could tell by the concerned look on his face that this would be more than ‘Official Business.’ Something had stirred his sense of humanity.

“Jeb?”

At the sound of her voice, he turned in his chair and pulled himself to his feet. Relief eased some of the lines in his face.

“Rachel. I’m glad you’re here.”

Now she was worried. Had something happened to a member of the family?

“Jeb, what’s wrong? Did something happen to Dennis?”

“Nothing like that, Hon. Dennis is all right. All the family’s okay.”

Rachel breathed deeply.

Jeb pulled himself around the desk and patted Rachel’s hand. “ Didn’t mean to give you a fright like that, Hon. I’m just so got--”

She’d never learn anything unless she was stern with him. “What happened, Jeb?” she said firmly.

“A person’s been found. A young person. Jim was on patrol up on the old wagon road and saw a body in a ditch.”

Rachel’s hand flew to her moth. “Oh, good Lord! Someone’s been killed! Was it someone we knew?”

“Complete stranger. And she’s not dead. Not even hurt, in fact, except for some minor scrapes and bruises. But there must be something wrong inside, inside her head, that is. She won’t answer any of our questions. We can do anything with her and she doesn’t protest. Just stares at us with those unseeing eyes.”

“Good Lord--”

“Jim thought she was dead. She was lying there, naked as a jay bird, looking like she’d been tossed away like an old shoe. But when Jim walked up to her, she moved and looked up at him. She wasn’t bleeding or injured in any way Jim could tell, so he bundled her up in his jacket and brought her into town. We put her to bed in one of the cells, seeing as how nobody’s in jail anyhow. Doc Webster’s back there with her now.”

“And she was just lying there, naked--”

“As the day she was born.”

“Do you think she’d been raped?”

“Hard telling. Something mean happened to her, though.” He straightened as another door opened. “Here’s Doc now. Well, Doc, what can you tell me?”

Webster set his medical bag down on Jeb’s desk and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Not a whole
lot. It’d help if she’d tell us what happened.”

“She wouldn’t open up to you, either?”

“Nope. So most of what I say is deductive reasoning. The bruises and scrapes are superficial. They’ll go away quickly. She’d got some ugly scars around her breasts and buttocks that makes me think she’s been tortured fairly recently. The marks are pink and fresh. Outside of that, she seems to be suffering from malnutrition and exposure. She looks like she’s about twelve years old, but I’m betting she’s closer to fifteen. And another thing, she’s no virgin. However she got that way is anybody’s guess.” The grim look on his face said that Webster considered it was against her will.

“Are you sending her to the hospital?”

Webster shrugged. “Can’t see how it’d do much good. She’s not injured or ill. Therapy might help, but that’ll take time. She’s just a stunned, docile little girl who needs time to come out of hiding and trust the world again. She needs to be in a normal home with caring people around her. Have you contacted her family?”

“I can’t. She has no identification.”

“None?”

“The only thing she was wearing were those earrings.”

Webster nodded. “Interesting, aren’t they? Lady bugs, I believe. Never seen anything quite like them before.” Webster rolled his shirt sleeves down and slipped on his coat. “What are going to do with her, then? Turn her over to the county juvenile authorities?”

Jeb slid his eyes toward Rachel, and suddenly Rachel understood why he’d called her. Another homeless stray had come to Jeb’s attention.

“No, Jeb,” she stated softly, but firmly. “It’d just be for a little while, Rachel, until we can locate her family.”

“We don’t know what kind of a person she is, Jeb. We don’t know what’s going on in her mind. Don’t be forgetting that we already have a young child in our home.”

“But she’s just a little slip of a thing, Hon. And she’s been through Hell. You could see that in her eyes. All she needs is a safe place to rest, just for a little while. I can’t turn anything like her away. Already, she doesn’t look lost and scared anymore, just stunned.”

Rachel knew it was useless to reason with a man who’s heart was as big as Jeb’s. “All right.”

“I’ll watch her and make sure everything goes okay.”

“I said all right, Jeb!” At his shocked look, she patted the front of his uniform blouse. “It’s all right. Really it is.” His grin still thrilled her, even after all these years. “All right, all right, where is this new charge of mine? I’ll have to get her cleaned up.”

“That’s my Rachell!” He gave her a quick hug. “She’s getting a shower and a delousing treatment, as we speak.”

“She’s getting what?!”

“Standard procedure, Hon.”
“Standard procedure, my foot!” Rachel stormed back into the cell area and came face to face with a matron leading a puny child from the shower. A blue jail shirt bagged around the girl’s body.

“Rachel, you scared me.”

“Did you get her sanitized, Jenny?”

“Standard procedure.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard. Some man wrote that ‘standard procedure’, too, I bet.”

Jenny’s eyes shine with humor, but kindliness was there, too, as she gently pulled the staring child forward. Jenny was a mother, too. “This is Rachel Fossey, honey,” she told the child. “Reckon she’s gonna be taking care of you for awhile.”

“Jeb told you that?”

“I’ve been around Jeb a long time, too, Rachel. I could see it coming. He wasn’t going to let this child be taken to some detention place. Fact is,” she said softly to Rachel, “I wouldn’t have allowed it, either. Even if she is white and I’m black, I’d be a good momma to a lost little baby like this.” She gave the child a hug, but the girl didn’t respond.

“I might be calling on you for help, Jenny. I might be needing all I can get.”

“Anytime I’m not on duty down here, Rachel. It might even help her being around my little babies.” She stroked the girl’s damp, stringy hair.

“We don’t know what’ll help her. But anything that gives her the security of like being in a home can’t hurt, unless, of course—”

Rachel and Jenny read each other’s eyes. The girl could’ve been abused in her home and run away when she couldn’t take it anymore. If that was true, Rachel and Jenny hoped the girl couldn’t be traced.

Rachel draped her long raincoat around the girl’s thin shoulders and pulled her forward. “Come on, honey, I’ll take you home with me now. Don’t worry, you’ll like it there.”

But Rachel felt the girl didn’t mind where she was taken.

Rachel hustled the raincoat-clad girl in the front door of the house. The aroma of freshly baked cake and the noises of cartoons filled the air. Heidi the dachshund had finished her nap and was thumping a greeting with her tail.

“Hello, Grandma. the cake’s done. I took it out of the oven, just like you said to do.”

“I appreciate it, darlin’.”

Something in Rachel’s voice sounded off and strained. Clara looked up from the television and saw the strange girl with her grandmother. “Who is she?”

“Someone who’s going to spend some time with us.”

“Where did Grandpa find her?” Even at her age, Clara knew about Jeb’s habit of collecting strays, too. Some people’s grandfathers collected stamps or sang old Hank Williams’ songs while plunking on a beaten up guitar. Clara’s grandfather was a frustrated missionary, apparently.
She was found out in the country. Grandpa’s going to try to help her find her way back home. She’ll sleep in your Uncle Dennis’s old room. Come on, dear,” Rachel said to the girl. “Let’s get you settled in.”

Rachel steered her up the stairs and into the small room. A three-drawer dresser with mirror reflected them as they stepped through the door. A three-quarters bed snuggled to one side under the sloping roof. An old library table and straight-back chair stood to one side of the room’s only window. Children’s classics and two ceramic dogs cluttered the top of the desk. A pennant for the Dallas Cowboys hung over it. A couple of sports’ trophies stood on a shelf over the desk.

“We can take some of these things down and make the room look more like a young lady lives in it. Would you like to help do that?”

But the girl didn’t seem to mind how the room was decorated. She stared ahead, waiting to be steered to the next place the lady wanted her to be.

Rachel seemed indecisive, then began to pull her raincoat off the girl. “Tell you what, how about a nice hot bath? I know that Jenny gave you a shower, but there’s nothing like a long soak in a full tub of water to melt your troubles away. Don’t you agree?” Rachel was getting used to no answers from the silent, pliant guest. She propelled the bare-footed girl down the narrow hall into the bathroom and turned on the tap. “Let’s just get this shirt off you and--” The girl’s thinness startled Rachel, but the young breasts were well developed. No wonder Doc Webster thought she was older than she looked. Rachel saw the scars, too, that he’d mentioned. But she didn’t want to examine the girl’s body too intently for fear of offending her.

“You just slip into the water and relax. Do you think you’ll be okay by yourself for a few minutes? A neighbor lady has some clothing that might fit you. My granddaughter Clara is downstairs, so if you want anything just holler at her.” How foolish that sounded when the girl had yet to speak. But this one-sided conversation was making Rachel nervous. “Tell you what, how about taking those earrings out. You’ve probably worn them for a long time now. Give those ears a rest.” She smiled thinly and thought that the girl would be as passive as she’d been about everything else.

But the girl reached up, unfastened the earrings, and dropped them into Rachel’s hand. That action proved two things to Rachel: the girl trusted Rachel and she could hear! Rachel had begun to wonder if the girl was deaf or addlepated.

“You relax. I’ll be right back.”

The girl sat poker-straight in the water. She did not relax.

Rachel smiled. “I’ll put these earrings on the dresser in your room. There’s a dish where guests can empty the contents of their pockets. Men especially like to use it for car keys and loose change. The room belonged to our son Dennis when he was growing up.” She arched an eyebrow. “You don’t have to worry about him coming home and wanting his room back. He’s a career serviceman stationed in Germany. He married a Dutch girl over there, and they have three children. We’ve only seen the youngsters a couple of times. When Dennis gets a leave, he generally goes skiing in Switzerland or sightseeing in nearby countries. It’s a busy time in their lives, and they want to soak up as much of Europe as they can.” Her eyebrow arched higher. “They’re practically strangers to us.” She shook herself out of her reverie and smiled thinly. “But enough of my problems. You have enough of your own. I’ll try to find you some clothes to tide you over until I can get you something proper.”

Rachel hurried downstairs and stuck her head into the living room. “Clara, I’m going to run over to Pam Morgan’s.”
Clara’s first impulse was to ask her grandmother if she had gotten scared. After all, Pam Morgan’s house was where Clara was to go if SHE got scared. But Clara bit her tongue in time. Grandma might think she was getting smart again. Her quick mouth was always getting her in trouble. It was a trait she’d inherited from her mother. Clara would’ve been surprised to have learned that she also inherited her sassiness from her grandmother. Rachel had once had a smart lip, too, but experience had taught her to keep her caustic remarks to herself. most of the time.

“Okay, Grandma.”

“The girl’s upstairs, taking a bath. Turn the TV down so you can hear her if she hollers for anything.”

“All right, Grandma,” Clara said with a sigh as she leaned forward to obey.

Rachel knocked on the kitchen door of the Cape Cod house next door. The door immediately swung open. A girlishly pretty woman smiled at Rachel. Pam Morgan looked too young to have teenage children, but she did.

“Come in, come in, Rachel. I’ve just put the second pot of coffee on, and it’ll be ready in a few minutes.”

“Thanks, but I can’t, Pam. I’m here to beg, borrow, or steal. We’ve got a young house guest and she doesn’t own a stitch.”

Pam’s dark eyes widened. “Rachel, I swear, you lead the most interesting life.”

“Jeb sees to that.”

“Another stray?”

“Yes. And until the Law can decide what to do with her, you’ll see her around our place. But she needs clothes. Noreen’s old things would be too big and Clara’s are too young. This girl is built pencil thin, like a boy. That’s why I thought of Skip. She’s not as tall, so maybe some of his old stuff might fit her.”

“Let’s look around. I think there’s some stuff up in the attic that didn’t sell in my garage sale last year. I always meant to give it to Good Will, but never got around to it. You know how intentions go.”

The two women dug through a box upstairs and scavenged two pairs of age softened levis, a handful of limp tee shirts, a short-sleeved, blue-checked shirt, a burgundy long-sleeved V-necked cardigan, and a blue striped bathrobe.

“Not much, but maybe it’ll get your girl through for a little while.”

“It’s more clothes than she has now. I’ll have to run downtown and buy her some undergarments at the dime store. She’d better have some sanitary products, too, unless her poor little body’s been shocked out of the need for that sort of thing.”

Pam frowned with concern. “Some people can be animals. Do you think she’s from an abused home?”

“It’s possible. She could be a runaway. If she is, I really wouldn’t blame her. Well, I’ve got to be getting back. I’ll send some money over with Clara.”
“I won’t hear of it! Now I know why I didn’t send the clothing to Good Will. It can be used right here.”

“Thanks, Pam. You’ve got a good heart.”

“I’ve got a long ways to go to match yours and Jeb’s.”

Rachel blushed. Such blatant praise embarrassed her.

“I’m back!” she announced to the living room, but she found Clara in the kitchen icing the cake.

“You forgot, Grandma. This frosting has to go on while the cake’s still hot.”

“Thanks, honey,” she murmured, then glanced at the clock. Ten-thirty! Jeb would be home for lunch at twelve, and Rachel still had to run down to the dime store. But first she had to see how their little visitor was doing.

“I’ll be back!” She told Clara as she tore out of the kitchen with Heidi barking joyfully at her heels. At the bottom of the stairs, the dog stopped. The dachshund couldn’t navigate the steps, but barked encouragement at Rachel’s upward flying figure.

“Here’s a bathrobe you can put on when you’re through soaking,” she said to the girl who was still soaking obediently in the bathtub. “There’s some other clothes on your bed. I’m going downtown and get you some underclothes. Is there anything in particular you can think of that you need?” she asked, not really expecting an answer. “That’s all right. It’s hard to think of everything right off.”

Rachel’s shopping expedition took longer than she’d figured. Someone who has nothing needs everything. Besides the clothing and sanitary items, she chose a hairbrush, toothbrush, deodorant, and spray cologne. Remembering that the girl was barefooted, Rachel guessed at a shoe size and picked up a pair of slip-ons that could double as house shoes. She grabbed a couple pair of blue anklets. Clara hated blue, so it would be easy to tell her anklets from the stranger’s.

Rachel was about to go through the check-out line when a display of dainty earrings for pierced ears caught her attention. She selected a pair of tiny pearls. The thought of the strange girl wearing her own lady bugs bothered Rachel. They might remind the girl of her ordeal, whatever it had been.

Flying into the kitchen, Rachel saw it’d be too late to brown sausages for lunch. “Here, heat these up,” she ordered, thrusting a package of wieners into Clara’s hands.

Upstairs, Rachel found the bathroom empty. The tub had been rinsed out, and the bathroom had been made neater. Any traces of the recent bath were gone.

Rachel found the girl wrapped in the striped bathrobe and lying on the bed. The girl looked at Rachel, but showed no further interest.

“Here’s the rest of your clothes so you can get dressed.” When the girl didn’t take the sack from Rachel’s hand, Rachel said, “Do you need some help? Have you forgotten how to, ah, dress yourself?”

After another moment, the girl got off the bed and took the sack from Rachel.

“Good,” Rachel said in relief. “I’ll, ah, leave you to yourself then. Lunch will be ready in a few moments. Come down when you’re ready.” When the girl gave no indication of assent or dissent, Rachel finally fluttered her hand in the air. “I’ll, ah, see you downstairs then.” Outside the room, Rachel caught a quick breath. This wasn’t going to be easy.
Lunch was on the table when Jeb arrived a few minutes after twelve. He shot the table a quick look as he hung his hat on its peg beside the door.

“Sorry it’s only wieners,” Rachel said as she gave him a passing hug. “I know I had promised you sausage cakes.”

“I’m just thankful I didn’t have to throw my hat in first.” His creased face looked a little less tense. “I’ll have to think of a way to thank you for this morning.”

She gave him a bold, unblinking stare. “You always do.”

A warm look passed between them, then they seemed to realize they weren’t alone in the house and broke the steady, primitive gaze. Rachel glanced at Clara. Nothing had missed the child’s notice. She had an exasperated look on her face that clearly said, ‘Married people! How can I tolerate them?’ But at least Clara got to see how married people acted toward each other in her grandparents’ home. She got no such example from her own mother.

“How is the girl?” Jeb asked as he settled at his place at the table.

“She’s been no trouble. She’s getting dressed now.” Rachel heard a slight whisper of cloth and looked up. “Oh, here she is.”

They all turned to the girl who’d slipped almost soundlessly into the kitchen.

Even Skip Morgan’s clothing was baggy on the girl’s slender frame, but she looked more civilized with her hair brushed and a hint of lipstick on her mouth. She even seemed pretty in the blue checkered shirt and jeans. If Clara hated blue, it certainly flattered this stranger’s coloring.

“Come on over here and sit down at the table, dear,” Rachel invited as she pulled out a chair.

Jeb halfway rose to his feet. There was a smile of pleasure on his round face. “My goodness, this is our guest? Looks like she’s gone under some improvement. Sit down, little miss. The vitals aren’t too fancy, but it’s sturdy and there’s a lot of it.”

“Now, Jeb, there’s no reason to be telling her that,” Rachel said as she scooped sweet potato casserole onto the girl’s plate. “She can see that you get your share of it.”

Clara rolled her eyes. If she’d said that, she’d been in big trouble. But Grandpa was grinning the way he did when he was enjoying Grandma’s teasing. Clara nearly choked on a bite of wiener. She realized the stranger was looking at her. Had she also understood that Grandma wasn’t teasing? Was this stranger more aware of her present surroundings than she wanted to let on?

(Food. It looked good. It looked safe to eat it. The people seemed kind. Maybe they wouldn’t hurt her. Not like....) The stranger tenuously touched the fork beside her plate. (We had things like this in our house. What were they called now?)

“Do you want me to help you with your food?” Rachel asked. “Can you use a fork?”

(A fork! Yes, yes, that’s what it’s called! A fork! And this is a, a, a spoon! And this is a, a....)

“Do you want me to cut up your wiener with your knife?”

(A knife!)

Rachel saw the spark of interest light the girl’s eyes. Jeb saw it, too. They were delighted with how
much the girl had come out of her shell since she’d been in their home. Maybe she soon would trust them enough to tell them her story.

“Tell you what,” Jeb said as he ladled chopped greens onto his plate. “Everything has gotta have a name. Our dogs and the cat have names. Half the farmers hereabouts even hang names onto their trucks. They talk about their cattle like each one was a family member. I think our little guest here should have a name, too. We could give her one for the time being. It’d be kind of a pet name. Would you mind that, little miss?” He took her silence for consent.

“I know, Grandpa. We could call her Kitty.”

“We could’ve named the cat that. No, I think something like Amanda would suit her. That’s a pretty name.”

“Amanda Blake played Kitty on television!” Clara declared.

“Amanda. How do you like that, little miss?”

Three sets of eyes turned on the stranger, but she stared at a spot over Jeb’s shoulder.

“Amanda, it is then. You just let us know anytime you want to be called something else. Rachel, how about some more of those sweet potatoes?”

After lunch, Jeb went back to work and the girls helped Rachel wash the dishes. Amanda could clear the table, dry the flatware, anything, as long as someone told her exactly what to do. It felt a little like programming a robot to deal with her.

Rachel was just leading the girls into the living room when she glanced out a window and saw movement.

“Oh, here comes Aunt Mildred. I wondered how quickly she’d hear about Amanda. Clara, you take Amanda out in back and introduce her to Goldie.”

“Come on,” Clara directed. “Grandpa’s hunting dog lives outside. She’s a golden retriever. Grandpa says we’ve got only one-and-a-half dogs. But Heidi THINKS she’s a tiger, even if she’s only a dachshund.” The girls disappeared out the kitchen door.

Heidi cocked her head sideways. She knew she was being discussed. A moment later, she heard the harsh voice belonging to Rachel’s aunt and hid behind the sofa. Heidi saw Aunt Polly bounding up the stairs in feline grace and wished she had long cat legs, too. She would beat the cat to safety

“Aunt Mildred, do come in,” Rachel greeted the large woman who sailed in the house as if she owned it. “Let’s sit here in the living room. That’s right. Take the recliner. It’s the most comfortable chair we have. Would you like some coffee? There’s some left in the kitchen. And chocolate cake, too.”

“I’ve no time for that.” She patted Rachel’s hands. “My dear, I understand that Jeb Stuart has dragged home another one of his strays. My dear, how do you stand it?”

“Jeb’s the best husband in the world. Surely I can help him out. This child needs both of our help.”

Mildred leaned forward in her chair. “I heard she was found nude! Really! Running around like a young wanton!”

“She wasn’t ‘running around,’ Aunt Mildred. And her state of undress probably wasn’t her idea.”
“Do you know who she is?”

“No. Jeb’s going to check the missing children’s reports. It’ll take time, though.”

“And in the meantime, she stays here?”

“That’s too early to say. The juvenile authorities will decide that on Monday. Over the weekend, she’ll stay with us.”

“Where is she now?”

“Out in the backyard with Clara.”

Mildred was shocked. “Do you think it wise to leave Clara with someone you don’t know? You have no idea what this person is capable of doing.”

Rachel arched her eyebrow. “I’m not worried. Somehow I think that Clara could hold her own with just about anybody.”

In the backyard, Clara threw a stick and the golden retriever joyously brought it back to her.

“Here,” she offered the stick to Amanda. “Do you want to throw it?”

The stick hung limply in Amanda’s hand. Amanda stared dully at it. Goldie danced impatiently and finally nudged Amanda’s hand. Amanda’s fingers straightened stiffly and the stick fell to the ground. Goldie sniffed at it, but knew its power to move came from the outstretched hand. Goldie nudged the hand again and whimpered.

“Here, I’ll pick up the stick for you.”

But when Clara offered the stick, she discovered that Amanda’s fingers were tangled in Goldie’s silken fur, and neither dog nor girl were discontented.

Later, when Clara had judged that Aunt Mildred had safely left, she led Amanda back into the house to sit in the living room. Heidi, somehow knowing of the time Goldie got to spend with Amanda, promptly plunked her head in Amanda’s lap and went to sleep. Or perhaps Heidi simply recognized a human she could trust.

Jeb was on patrol that night and didn’t get home until midnight. He crept into bed, gently kissed Rachel’s forehead, and settled beside her.

“Sorry, Hon, for leaving you alone so long with the new girl.”

“That’s all right. She was no problem.”

“Everything okay?”

“Settled in for the night. I gave her one of your big old shirts to sleep in. That way, you can see to it that the county gets its shirt back.”

“I don’t know what I’d do without you, Hon. Wouldn’t want to try. You sure can take a lot on the chin.”

“That’s ‘cause I know I’ve got you.” She snuggled against him. “That makes everything else easy.”

He’d heard it all before, but he never got tired of hearing it. “What makes me such a grand prize?”
“Because everyone else wants you, and you better stay mine,” she said in a teasing tone, but he could hear the barb hidden in it.

“Or--”

“Or nobody will want you. I’ll see to that.”

Their teasing banter and soft laughter floated across the hall. The stranger stared at the ceiling of her bedroom and strained to listen to them. She used to hear sounds like that. Or had she been the one making them?

The next day being Sunday, the Fosseys piled into Rachel’s old Charger and headed out for Rachel’s brother’s place. Creed and Emmy Bauers farmed a hundred and twenty acres six miles outside of town. They raised prize cattle on the farm where Rachel had grown up. The rambling, two-story house and numerous outbuildings concealed secret hidey-holes discovered and treasured by several generations of Bauer children.

Jeb and Rachel Fossey were casual Christians. Sunday saw them rarely in church, but they’d sent their children and then Clara to Sunday school and saw to it that the youngsters had participated in Christmas and Easter pageants. A permanent item in their yearly budget had always been a healthy contribution to the church. They didn’t tithe on Jeb’s salary, but they did what they could. But as far as serving on committees or teaching Sunday school, the Fosseys were inactive. Occasionally, they felt a pang of guilt by not being more active. But they felt that living Christian lives and being good examples would alleviate some of the pain to their conscience. After all, theirs was a sin of omission, not commission.

Amanda’s silent presence caused a little uneasiness at first, but she was quickly lost in the activity of producing a large family meal. Several of Creed and Emmy’s children were still at home, and they included Amanda in their sport. Amanda seemed particularly interested in the movie magazines belonging to the fourteen-year-old daughter.

After the dishes, the men and children mysteriously disappeared outdoors, and the two women were left alone in the suddenly quiet house.

“Amanda has to appear before juvenile authorities tomorrow, and she has nothing decent to wear. Do you think there’s anything of your girls’ clothes that would fit her?”

Emmy dug through a box in the attic and pulled out a dirndl skirt with a pattern of red roses on a white background. “With these gathers, it doesn’t matter how big the skirt is. The only thing that’s going to touch her is the waistband, and I can make that tighter on the sewing machine.” She dug further into the box. “There’s something else, if it’s still around. Here!” She triumphantly displayed a blouse above her head. It was shell pink colored with cap sleeves and seemed to be made of some flimsy material that couldn’t be seen through. “I think this outfit should look just right on your girl.”

And it did. After Emmy had nipped in the waist here in the skirt and added a few darts there in the blouse, the outfit did indeed look like it had been made for Amanda. Emmy rummaged through some old jewelry of hers and hung a simple cross around Amanda’s neck. And then Rachel could see the effect Emmy was striving for, the effect that mirrored Amanda’s style. Quaintness. A rural, awkward quaintness that was even more backward than normal for this small-town area of Arkansas. And Amanda assumed the style so well. Was she maybe a castaway from some mountain back in Tennessee or Virginia? She just didn’t look like she had originated from some isolated swamp in a Louisiana bayou or a dusty cattle ranch in Colorado.

Rachel felt this was somehow a clue to Amanda’s identity. But how could she tell Jeb that his
strange girl had probably come down out of the hills from some remote part of the country? And what part? Rachel thought of the Appalachians. But Amanda could as easily be from the Missouri Ozarks or the swamps of Florida. Or from the ghetto of some big city. Wherever it had been, it must have been somewhere where living had been impoverished for her. And it must have been somewhere where she had been abused or neglected, or both.

Supper was over that evening at the Fossey home, and Rachel was still musing over whether to mention Amanda’s clothes to Jeb as they sat sipping another cup of coffee in the living room. Clara was working on her homework upstairs, and Amanda had disappeared after helping with the meal cleanup.

“Creed’s got that new hound coming along real good,” Jeb was saying to Rachel. “He should be ready for rabbit hunting when Lon gets out here.” Jeb’s brother-in-law was a high school superintendent in Little Rock, but came home as often as he could to the activities he’d enjoyed as a child. Creed and Jeb were his hunting partners, along with any of their sons who happened to be around.

“Ruth Ann said that his visit should be around Easter,” Rachel replied. “It’s going to be a busy time. I’m glad I’ll have your sister here to help me cook. I’m making lists of what we’ll need. I’ve got the ham bought already.”

Jeb grinned. “Sounds like you’re making plans.”

“I have to.” She sipped her coffee. “Your cousin Joe and his family will be here all the way from Des Moines.”

“That makes nine extra people, so far, that’ll be at the table.”

“We can farm some of them out. Clara can sleep on the living room sofa, so that will free her bed for some married couple.”

“I know what you’re thinking, Hon. Amanda probably won’t be with us that long. The juvenile authorities probably won’t even give her to us tomorrow.”

It’d be the first time they didn’t, Rachel thought, but didn’t say it. And one of their charges had stayed three months. Rachel had grown attached to the seven-year-old boy by that time. After the heartbreak of losing him, she’d nearly said ‘no more.’ But there was always one more, always some child needing a temporary home. Jeb seemed to attract them. Rachel supposed he always would. Maybe that was one reason why Rachel loved him so much.

“We’ll wait and see what tomorrow brings,” Rachel said softly.

Jeb smiled and squeezed her hand.

“Why, Amanda,” Rachel said, looking up. “I didn’t hear you come down the stairs. You can move like a cat, can’t you? And you’re all dressed up. Did you come to show Jeb your outfit?”

Jeb released Rachel’s hand and turned to Amanda. He looked her up and down. “Now, don’t you look nice. You’ll look real pretty tomorrow.”

“Emmy even gave her an old clutch purse of hers. Now Amanda can keep her lipstick and hairbrush and tissues with her.”

“Emmy has always been thoughtful, that’s a fact,” Jeb commented.
“And she even has the Bible Emmy gave her. When she got it, Amanda sat down and started reading it like it was an old friend. She must be very used to going to church.” A new thought struck Rachel. “Were you wanting to go to church today, Amanda? Are you used to attending services? We’re not very active ourselves. Why, some people are so strict that they even attend Sunday night services as well as Sunday mornings.”

Amanda’s shoulders jerked.

“Is that why you’re dressed? You thought we would be going to church this evening?”

“No church around here has services at night, Rachel,” Jeb reminded her. “There’s a Baptist church over in Colliersville that has meetings twice on Sundays I understand. Is that it, Amanda? Are you Southern Baptist?”

Amanda simply turned and left the room.

“She must be from a small town or a rural area.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Simple clothes. Fresh scrubbed face. Nothing artificial.”

“You’re seeing what you want to see, old man.”

“Maybe. But I think she’s an innocent angel who has lost her way.”

“I think you’re probably right.” She frowned, then plunged ahead. “Jeb, I have something to tell you.” Rachel told him how quaint Amanda had looked to her in her clothes and how the look seemed to fit her. “Cheap and tawdry suit her. If you’d put anything sophisticated or even ordinary on her, the clothes would make her seem dowdy.”

“You women!” But he had a hunch Rachel was right.

“You mark my words, Jeb Stuart Fossey. ‘Amanda’ has an Irish-English background and has come down out of the hills somewhere.”

Jeb gazed at her with a slight smile on his lips. “That describes our families, too, Hon.”

She lightly slapped his hand. “I know. Maybe that’s why we felt so close to her so soon.”

Jeb left the meeting with the juvenile authorities in smiles. Judge Norris and Commissioner Davis had awarded custody of ‘Amanda’ to the Fosseys. They were only glad to accept responsibility for the girl. There were a lack of reliable foster homes in the county, and Sheriff Fossey always seemed to volunteer more for humanitarian reasons than financial.

Jeb saw Rachel and Amanda into the Charger, then went back to his office.

Rachel drove past the schoolhouse.

“That’s where Clara is right now. You can go to classes there, too, if you want. Wouldn’t you like that?” The girl’s silence annoyed Rachel. “You’re going to have to talk sometime, Amanda. You can’t go through life like this!” Rachel cautioned herself. Who knew what this poor, wayward child had experienced in her young life. “I’m sorry, Amanda. I know you must’ve endured something very painful and tragic. But I’m here to listen. So is Jeb. Trust us. When the time comes, we’ll be here for
you.”

(Other people had wanted me to trust them,) the girl-they-called-Amanda thought.

Heidi was overjoyed to see Amanda and dropped in her lap when the girl sat on the sofa.

“Don’t let her outside, Amanda. I know she’d like to be playing with other dogs, but we’re going to get her bred to a pedigreed dog soon. I’m going to throw a casserole together for supper. Clara will be home soon. You can watch TV until she gets here. There’s a cartoon show on this channel that she likes. Change it if you want.”

Amanda was still sitting where she’d been left when Clara walked into the house. Heidi thumped her tail, but didn’t move from Amanda’s lap.

“Loyal dog,” Clara murmured. She reached to turn the television dial. “Oh. You’ve got on the right channel. I bet Grandma told you to leave it here. She knows which shows I like.” She settled in her chair. “Been to see the judge today? Bet you’re going to stay at this house, aren’t you? Grandpa lets anybody stay here. He gets paid for it, did you know that?” Clara looked at Amanda critically. “You don’t know anything, do you? You don’t even know your name!”

(My name is, is, ah--)

“My last name is Brindle, but I’m not all sure there even was a Johnny Brindle, like my mama says. I’m not even sure if she knows WHO my papa is, or if Brindle just isn’t some name she snagged out of the air, like some sort of fairy dust that was drifting by. But that makes me unique,” she said smugly. “My daddy may be the king of the fairies!” She saw the look of sympathy and interest on Amanda’s face. Amanda knew that Clara was covering her doubts with bluster. Clara could see that Clara was in pain over the daddy situation, but Amanda’s pity made Clara bristle. “At least I know who my mother is! I know the hospital where I was born, and I can read her family tree anytime I want! I even know my name, and I can say it! I’m not sitting on a stranger’s sofa, acting like I don’t have any more sense than God gave a grape and taking up that sofa space meant for someone else!”

“That’s about enough of that,” Rachel said as she snapped off the TV.

“Grandma! My cartoons!”

“Not until you apologize to Amanda. And maybe not even then. Otherwise, go to your room.”

Clara flounced away, shooting Amanda a look of pure hatred as she passed her.

“I’m sorry, Amanda. Clara’s a little immature. She feels threatened by your presence. She likes to claim Jeb and me for herself. You can watch TV if you want.”

But Amanda stared into space as she absently stroked Heidi’s fur.

(Papa. There was something about Papa. Had to find Papa. No, it didn’t matter. Nothing mattered, anymore.)

She opened her Bible and began to read.

Jeb and Rachel were disappointed in Clara’s behavior, but they could understand it. The girl had endured a lot of family unrest in her eleven years. The grandparents hoped they were giving her a
stability that her errant mother had failed to provide.

On Tuesday Rachel took Amanda to the doctor’s office for a more thorough examination. Despite the leanness of her body and her inability or reluctance to communicate, the girl was in satisfactory condition. The doctor thought she’d even filled out some since he’d seen her on Saturday.

An uneasy truce prevailed as Clara and Amanda watched the cartoon show that afternoon. Clara glared, but held her tongue. Sometimes the old saw is true: Actions speak louder than words. And Clara’s actions indicated that she resented Amanda’s presence.

At five-thirty, the doorbell rang and a young woman wearing a waitress’s uniform let herself in.

“Mama!” Clara leaped at the newcomer.

“My, that’s quite a welcome,” Noreen said as she untangled herself. She smoothed her short, black hair and straightened her uniform over her short, stocky body. “What’s you doing’, kiddo?”

“Watching cartoons.”

“Hmm. Tom and Jerry. They were always my favorites, too. Grandpa’s, too.”

“They were? How about the Flintstones?”

“Loved them. They were a little after Grandpa’s time, though.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Rachel remarked from the kitchen door. “He watched them with you and Dennis. When did you come in, Noreen?”

“Just now, Maw. Thought I’d stop and chat. See my girl. Not many edges worn off her yet.”

“Her grandpa likes them kept sassy.”

“That’s why he married you, Maw. He wanted a good pattern.”

“Among other reasons.”

“Who’s this?” Noreen asked, indicating Amanda. “One of Daddy’s finds?”

“Yes. We’re calling her Amanda. She’s staying with us for awhile.”

“Of course. She would be. Dear old Daddy. He never changes.”

“Come on into the kitchen. There’s some coffee hot.”

Noreen followed her mother.

Rachel placed steaming cups on the kitchen table. “What’s new? You rarely pay social visits.”

Noreen grinned and sipped her coffee. “Good old Maw. You always could cut right through the crap.” She lit a cigarette and took a puff. “I’m thinking of getting married.”

“Again?”
“This time it’s for sure, I think. But Curt wants to homestead in Alaska.”

“Are they still doing that?”

Noreen blew out a long puff of smoke. “Hell if I know. But he’s hell bent to go up there. And I’m hell bent not to let him get away from me.”

“But, Alaska?”

Noreen flicked cigarette ash sharply into an ashtray. Her dark eyes snapped. “I’m twenty-nine years old, Maw. I’m not getting any younger.”

“What if it doesn’t last? Noreen, you’re hardly the pioneer type.”

Noreen shrugged. “I hear there’s good jobs up there. Besides, I can always come home.”

“Why leave in the first place? Besides Curt.”

“Where can a person go if she’s already home? I’m young, Maw. I want to see something of the world.”

“That’s what you said when you left Baby Clara with us.”

“That’s who I came to talk about. Baby Clara.”

Rachel’s heart gave a skip. Was Noreen going to dump Clara on them for good? Or take her along? Either prospect was frightening. They’d had Clara for so long, but didn’t they deserve a few quiet years together alone?

“Could you and Daddy keep her a little longer? Just until I’m settled up there?”

Rachel let out her breath. Noreen would never be settled. Rachel supposed she would’ve been just as relieved to hear that Noreen was taking Clara with her, but for different reasons.

“I’m sure that will be all right with your father. I know it is with me. Clara’s adjusted to this school. She has friends here. It’d be a shame to take her away from all that she knows here. This is her home now.”

“She’d adjust to Alaska, too. I’ve got a tough kid in there. She’ll be just like me.”

Not if I can help it, Rachel thought. But then she remembered that she and Jeb had raised Noreen. How could they expect Clara to be any different?

“When are you leaving?”

“As soon as Curt tells his folks. Next week, I think.”

Next week. One child in Germany, one in Alaska. Why?

“Will we get to meet him?”

“Oh, sure. He’s a heavy-equipment operator and chews tobacco. He likes country-western music played real loud. You know, the cheap kind of music. Curt’s not perfect, but you might find something to like about him.”

A barb of annoyance pricked at Rachel. “I’m sure he has some good qualities, too. You must learn to
look for them.”

Noreen shot her mother a piercing stare. “I have. He's breathing. He's willing to take me on and let me go with him.” She set aside her coffee cup. “Well, I have to be going, Maw.”

“Without seeing your father? He’ll be home soon.”

“You mean he’s taking time off from rounding up all the desperadoes?”

“He is just--”

“--doing his job. Yeah. I know. Well, I have to be going, anyway,” Noreen said as she pushed into the living room. “Any family news I should know?”

“Aunt Mildred was here the other day.”

“Aunt Mildred! How is the dear, old gossip?”

“Her lumbago is acting up again.”

“I don’t see how she’d hardly allow that.”

They went chatting on toward the front door, unaware that Amanda’s unblinking eyes were fixed on them. Something had clicked in her memory. Something they’d said jogged a recollection.

(Aunt Leona was a sister to Granny Dalton till Leona up and died on us. Folks came down out of the hills to attend that funeral. Granny said they was all kinfolk to us, one way or the other. Sure wish that pretty Jacob Talbot wasn’t kin. I could set my cap for him.)

Noreen stopped at the front door and a funny look passed over her face.

“What’s wrong?”

“That girl, that Amanda, she’s staring at us,” Noreen hissed.

“It does look strange to see some intelligence flash in her eyes like that, but she means no harm by staring at us. She’s probably just looking at your flashy earrings. She seems to like earrings.”

“What do you know about her, Maw? Are you sure you should have her here in the house?”

“There’s no harm in her. She’s just a poor lost child that can’t remember who she is or where her home is. Your daddy’s trying to find something out about her. He’s checking reports of missing children all over the country, most likely.”

Noreen shot Amanda another look. Amanda had returned her vacant stare to the television screen. “She still bothers me. Oh, well, you and Daddy should know what you’re doing. See ya.” With a quick smile, she was gone.

Rachel shut the door and stared at it for a moment. On the way back to the kitchen, she shot Amanda a furtive glance. The girl hadn’t moved.

Rachel tried to dismiss the doubt that Noreen had raised in her, but it nagged like a paper cut on a finger joint. Was Amanda a pitiful victim or a clever criminal? What did they know about her anyway?

Rachel wished Jeb would hurry up and learn something about their silent visitor.
The next evening Jeb was late to supper. The girls were eating canned peaches and oatmeal cookies for dessert when Jeb piled into his kitchen chair.

“Long day?” Rachel asked as she poured coffee.

“Yeah,” he answered as he snaked his stubby hand over his thinning hair. “How’d things go here?”

“The plumbers came and fixed the stool. Clara got an ‘A’ in a history test. And it looks like we just about got Easter dinner sorted out. We just about know who’s bringing what. I talked to Ruth Ann this afternoon.”

“That’s progress. Well, the girls are finished with their supper, it looks like. Fine work on the test, Clara.”

“Thanks, Grandpa. I like history.”

“Why don’t you take Amanda on into the living room? No sense you girls hanging around until I finish supper. Grandma can call you when it’s time to do dishes.”

“Thanks, Grandpa,” Clara said in a jaded voice. “You’re all heart.”

Clara’s sassy behavior generally made Jeb beam, although he was careful not to let her know of his pride in her smart mouth. But Rachel noticed that it all went over Jeb’s head tonight.

“What did you get rid of them for?” she asked as she handed him the mashed potatoes.

“I think I might know who Amanda is. Or at least something about her.” He scooped potatoes on his plate, then reached for the milk gravy.

Rachel waited patiently, although her curiosity was about to split her open. Jeb didn’t realize how much he was aggravating her. There was no teasing on his part. He was just thinking.

“You remember a few weeks ago when that actor fellah’s wife was killed up in St. Louis by a hit-and-run driver?”

“Sure. Her husband was Sean Murphy. I always liked him. I thought his wife’s death was a crying shame. He seemed very devoted to her.” She frowned. “Why? Was Amanda involved in that terrible accident somehow?”

“She might’ve been there when it happened. A bunch of women crossed the street with the Murphy woman. There was a young girl with them. Police don’t know much about her. One person told them the girl had stringy blonde hair and wore rustic clothes like she was no city gal.”

“That could be Amanda, but it’s still not much to go on.”

“How about this: The girl wore earrings that looked like lady bugs.”

“Lady bugs--?! Oh, my Lord--”

“Yeah? How about that?” But he didn’t seem too pleased with his discovery.

“What’s to be done with her now, if she is the same girl?”

“I don’t know. The St. Louis authorities just wanted to know if she was okay. I’ve phoned them and told them that I had the young girl with me. They recommended that she should have some medical treatment to help her with the shock of what she saw.”
“Poor kid. Did St. Louis have any identification on her?”

“Not a clue. Must’ve been just somebody who was passing through. Maybe we can find some trace of her people. Pictures of her can be distributed in hopes someone will recognize her. But who even knows what part of the country she’s from?”

“She’s the only one who can tell you for sure.”

“And she’s not talking. But maybe in time she’ll trust us enough to tell us. Right now, I have to tell her what we know so far.”

The girl they called Amanda lay staring up at the ceiling of the room that had once belonged to Dennis Fossey. But this stare was different. It wasn’t vacant. What Jeb Fossey had told her about St. Louis had forced her to remember the terrors in her immediate past. The pretty lady getting killed had been only one of them.

But Jeb didn’t know that. Nobody did, because Amanda hadn’t spoken since the pretty lady died. At first, she couldn’t. And then she discovered she didn’t have to speak. In fact, she thought people sometimes preferred it if she didn’t talk. And the things that people confided in her! Maybe they thought their shabby secrets were safe with a mute person. Truth was, Amanda really didn’t care. After all that’d happened, other people’s affairs seemed so mundane.

Her mind kept going back to Silva. Dear, sweet, angel-on-earth Silva. Silva who’d found the exhausted, yet still terror-stricken girl on a St. Louis street and taken her to the shelter of his tenement apartment. Silva who didn’t know she had just witnessed a hit-and-run murder, but protected her from the dangers of the streets after dark. He should’ve taken her to the police, but he wasn’t exactly a friend to the police. Nobody in his black neighborhood was. But he had to get this young white girl off the streets or she’d be raped and murdered by morning.

Nobody much lived in Silva’s tenement, just some old people downstairs. It was really his hideout. Silva was in his early twenties, lived by his wits, and was always sidestepping youth gangs and the police.

Silva had no family. His few possessions lay scattered in his apartment with its high ceilings and large rooms. Nothing felt homey about the place, but it was safe. Papers and broken furniture littered the floor, and the girl knew it’d been a long time since anyone had made any attempt at cleaning in here.

Silva dubbed her Moochie. It was a phenomenon she’d see from other people, such as the Fosseys. If people didn’t learn your name, they’d call you something. Just like old Adam in the Bible who went around naming the plants and the animals in the Garden of Eden. Why, some guys back home even named their pickups and trucks.

Silva and Moochie spent time just being together. She scanned the old movie gossip magazines that he brought to her and poured over the torn Bible she found in the rubble on the floor. When he was out of the apartment, she watched for him from the window. She was careful not to be seen herself. Sometimes she just sat on the floor, leaned on the windowsill, and watched the clouds drift by. Up there in the sky the world was still clean, not dirty like it was down in the streets. Silva chuckled at her softly, but knew she was finding her own way to heal herself.

Silva was a charming talker and Moochie was a good listener. She loved best the story of how Silva had gotten his name. His parents were young people from Alabama who’d gone to St. Louis for a
fresh start. They loved the South, but hated the stagnation of their rural childhood homes and the lack of opportunities for poor black people.

They found jobs quickly and were overjoyed when they learned a baby was on its way. The young mother had looked at her first born in wonder, especially the unusual silver flecks in his kinky black hair. “It’s silver,” she’d murmured in her soft southern accent. The nurse, overhearing, assumed the baby’s name was Silva and recorded it as such in her notes. Each parent was mystified by the baby’s name, but thought the other parent had chosen it. Each parent was slightly hurt about not being consulted on the name choice. Only later did the truth come out, and the young parents had a good laugh about it. But by that time, though, the baby was known as Silva to them. They never thought of changing his name, and Silva he had remained.

Moochie sat cross-legged on the floor and hugged her knees each time Silva told the story, then she saddened when she heard what had happened to the young family.

Silva’s father was a policeman who was killed when Silva was a toddler. His mother became a prostitute to support herself and her child, but died of malnutrition and pneumonia when Silva was thirteen. He’d lived on the streets ever since. It was a hard existence, but Silva was street-wise. He skirted dangerously on each side of the Law and seemed to thrive on peril.

Someone as hardened as Silva should’ve killed Moochie himself when he first saw her, but he had a loving heart. Through all of her frightening years, Silva’s mother had raised her son to see the beauty in the world. She’d taught him to be caring of someone less fortunate, and this white girl certainly was that.

Silva took the lost white waif to his refuge and hoped he wouldn’t regret it. Anybody could be after her, and he might get hurt if he was in the way. She herself might turn on him. Instead he found a person who trusted him and relied on him. No one had ever been that dependent on him. Silva loved it. He loved the way her eyes followed him in worship. He loved the way she clung to his every word. So what if she didn’t speak. He loved Moochie as a friend, and that was all that mattered.

Then he realized he wanted to be more than her friend. She had gentle ways and he wanted her to turn soft glances at him. He wanted her small hands to pass over his body without barely touching. He wanted to hold her in his arms and soothe the soft whimpering he heard from her in the night.

Silva wanted Moochie to be his lover, and the possibility overwhelmed him. Since his mother had died, he hadn’t allowed himself to get close to anyone. Love hurt too much when he lost someone. But Moochie was different. Maybe he could take the chance of loving her. But he didn’t know how she felt. He didn’t want to frighten her. He didn’t want to lose her as a friend.

One day they watched a pigeon rolling loops in the air. It amused them and they laughed, he with his voice, she with her eyes. He looked at her and smoothed her hair out of her face. That was all it had taken. As simple as that.

Silva took Moochie into his bed and initiated her into the adult world of womanhood. She relished everything he taught her and was glad she could be pleasing him. They were complete in the world of the tenement apartment.

Their idyllic world lasted until the afternoon that five black youths burst into the apartment and repeatedly knifed an off-guard Silva until he fell limply to the floor. Then the black youths turned to the white girl. And the things they had done to Moochie. Oh, the things they had done to that poor, unprotected child. That’s when a detached part of Moochie learned that Granny Dalton was wrong.
It wasn’t because these guys were black that they should be feared. It was because they were guys.

And Silva, her darling Silva, lay dead beside her. And he had treasured her. He hadn’t grabbed and pawed at her the way these guys did.

Moochie concentrated on Silva and their time together. She forgot the sweating, distorted faces working over her. Her mind blocked out the pain of the knives carving chunks out of her flesh.

When their hatred and their lust cooled, they left her to die alone. Evening shadows crept across the darkening apartment, and the only movement within was the glistening tears sliding down Moochie’s cheeks. Her breasts and thighs trickled blood in dozens of places where knives had nicked at them.

But Moochie had the satisfaction of knowing that the blacks had not reached her mind. That’s where she’d gone in hiding from the ugliness that was happening to her. Otherwise, she would’ve died screaming at their crude hands. Perhaps her indifference had angered them when they couldn’t make her suffer. Perhaps they thought living would be more punishment to the white bitch than dying. Perhaps they would return to torture her further. Perhaps she should escape. But how? And to where? And how could she bring herself to leave poor Silva?

Silva’s eyes stared without seeing at the tattered ceiling over his head. His slack mouth was open in a grimace of surprise and denial. Blood had stiffened the front of his shirt and collected in a clotted pool beneath him. How long he had lain paralyzed, yet living, and watched his Moochie being attacked over and over was anybody’s guess. How long had he lain, growing gradually weaker, while he’d bled silently to death?

He was a monstrosity now. A thing to be feared by primitive man and dismissed by modern people. But to Moochie he was still Silva, her darling Silva. And she still loved him.

Moochie went slightly crazy then. She rolled onto his corpse and wept openly in the graying shadows. Their drying blood smeared together in one last, orgiastic union. This was her darling, her sweet darling. The boy who’d been her friend. The man who’d taught her so much about her own body. The person who’d become her only connection with the world outside.

At last she left him. She had to be practical. The gang might return.

Moochie washed in the bathtub and dressed in some of Silva’s clothing to keep her clothing fresh. Her oozing blood still dampened spots on the denim, but she could always discard his soiled garments later.

Moochie hid in another vacant apartment for two days and healed. The gang returned as suspected and searched for her, but there were so many rooms that the blacks finally lost interest. For hours after that, Moochie started at any noise no matter how small it was. She slept fitfully with one ear awake.

Moochie ate sparingly of the food she’d brought with her to the vacant apartment. She knew there was more food in Silva’s rooms, but she was reluctant to go back there. The thing that Silva was turning into was up there, and she did not want to see it again. Silva’s dignity would somehow be abused. But other, baser, reasons held her back. All of the superstitions of her Ohio hill country background surfaced when the sun went down. At night everyone’s afraid of the dark, no matter what they say. That primitive fear held true for dead bodies, too, even if it had been someone well loved when it had been living.

Moochie also knew that the other residents of the tenement would start noticing Silva’s dead presence. The police would be called in and find Moochie in their search. Although she would be
safe physically, she couldn’t face the prying people who would insist on picking at her. She could hide from the blacks during their attack; they could only torment her physically. But police and other do-gooders would chase her down to where she really lived, down to where she felt untouchable in her mind. She had trouble thinking quickly anyway, and the shock of recently witnessing two horrible deaths muddled what little sense she did possess.

The second evening she dressed in her own clothes and slipped out of the tenement. The only ceremony marking the event was flushing the bathroom stool. She’d used the bathroom sparingly and never flushed in fear someone might hear and investigate. Now, because she was leaving, it didn’t matter.

She chose the dinner hour in hopes that fewer people would see her. Luck, more than her own cunning, saw her safely out of the ghetto. Not that she didn’t have some frights and had to hide herself in shadowy recesses of old buildings. More than once she wished for a familiar tree from home to hide behind. But the city was a jungle far more savage than any rain forest could be. All she wanted of this alien world was out.

By morning she found herself at an I-55 truck stop on the outskirts of the city. How she’d ever gotten there would forever remain a mystery to her.

The man in the booth had greasy, puffy fingers and a leer on his face, but he offered food to Moochie. She’d used the diner’s bathroom once and watched people come and go all morning. Finally, at noon, hunger drove her back inside the diner. Surely someone would help her. She passed several booths of burly truckers. Granny Dalton said they were such an ornery lot, so Moochie passed them by.

She stopped in front of the booth where the fat man was sitting because she couldn’t believe that any one person could eat that much food at any one sitting. All sorts of plates and cups and glasses crowded around his elbows.

He looked up at her staring eyes, and a twinkle came into his flesh-hidden eyes. “Hungry, kid? Come on. Sit down. I’ve got plenty to eat. And I can order more.”

Moochie knew what she would probably have to trade for the food, but she was so hungry that she really didn’t care. She slid into the booth beside him and felt his slimy eyes go over her as she bit into a cheeseburger and reached for a French fry.

“What are you doing out here, kid? Ain’t you a little young to be on the road?”

He was dressed in a worn suit and sweat trickled into the folds of his triple chin. A tie in gaudy colors was held down by a flashy stick pin. A cheap ring with a large, imitation stone cut into the flesh of one hairy finger. An order book was crammed into his shirt pocket. He was probably some sort of salesman.

“The silent type, huh? Not much meat on those bones, either. Bet it’s all prime what’s there, eh?” He leaned toward her and chuckled.

Moochie smelled the tobacco on his breath and the rancid sweat of his body. He wasn’t clean like her sweet Silva had been. This hog was probably sprung from the red-necked, poor white southern trash that Granny Dalton looked down on.

“You know, little honey, we don’t really need words to be friendly. Why, some of my most pleasurable moments have been spent with not one word being spoken.”
The slimy man laughed at his own joke and drew the further attention of two truckers seated a few booths away. These men were outraged by what was going on. Generally, they let truck stop honeys ply their trade in freedom. But this girl was obviously a child and a hungry one, at that. She shouldn’t have to pay for a meal by lying down for that lecherous old goat.

The man murmured dirty stories to Moochie while she ate, but she barely noticed him. She ate a tossed salad and another cheeseburger. She didn’t like tossed salad, but she was hungry for fresh vegetables. How long had it been since she’d eaten a square meal? Since climbing on the bus in Ohio?

Moochie finished the second glass of milk and the last scraps of apple pie.

“You can eat like me, little honey. I don’t know where you’re putting it all.”

She didn’t, either.

He leaned toward her again. “I still got my motel room key, little honey. I gotta be around this berg for a few days. Big deal going on. You wouldn’t understand all the details. This is kinda my center of operations. Nice and convenient, ain’t it?” He raised a bushy eyebrow. “Would you like to go back to my motel room now and freshen up? A person needs to rest up after a big meal.”

Pay up time, she thought.

They slid out of the booth, but were stopped by the two truckers who blocked their path.

“What’s going on, guys? Need directions outa here?” The fat man grinned like everything was alright, but sweat popped out on his face again.

“What you taking the little lady, fat boy?”

“Same place you would if you’d seen her first. Or with you guys, the sleeper of your truck would do. Makes no difference to her.”

“Yes, it does! She’s just a kid, you old fart!”

“She eats like a woman. She can pay up like a woman.”

“Anybody ever tell you that you’re a slimy bastard?”

“I don’t want any trouble here, boys.”

“Then take your fat mitts off her!”

“Mind your own business, buster!”

A scuffle ensued and Moochie ducked out of the diner. All the fat boy got for his morning romancing was a busted jaw, a night in jail, and an expensive bill for wreckage and a large amount of food that he’d ordered from the diner. But that was the least of it. His wife, finally humiliated beyond her endurance, sued for divorce and threw him out of their home. His casual philandering had finally caught up with him.

On her way out of the diner, Moochie grabbed a jacket hanging on a peg. Everyone else, patrons and waitresses alike, had become involved in the fist fight between the fat man and the two truckers. Nobody paid Moochie any attention.

Outside, Moochie slipped on the jacket and ran. Later, she found a handful of change in a pocket.
She didn’t mean to steal, but other commandments had fallen by the wayside already. Why not this one? At least, the jacket had made her warm, and rich.

She knew the dangers of hitchhiking, but that was her only choice. The pocket change she found wouldn’t pay for a bus ticket. If she hitched with someone headed southwest, she knew she’d be going in the general direction of Texas. And that’s where Papa was.

She accepted a ride with an elderly couple who discussed her hitching on the interstate almost as if she were deaf. Maybe they thought she was, since she didn’t speak. They were shocked and concerned, though, and considered reporting her to the police.

When they stopped for coffee at Festus, Missouri, Moochie learned that the interstate swung southeast and followed the curve of the Mississippi River. She wanted to go southwest, so she slipped away from the old couple. Besides, they still might’ve thought it was their responsibility to report her to the police. Moochie was leaving a growing trail of crime behind her and didn’t have the energy to explain it all to the authorities, even if she wanted to speak.

Out in the parking lot, she heard men talking about their trip home. They were driving a straight truck loaded with farm supplies back toward Poplar Bluff. Moochie tucked herself under the tarp and headed south as a stowaway in the back of their truck.

The combination of several nights with irregular sleep, the big meal at noon, and the gentle rocking of the truck soon lulled her to sleep. Moochie tried to fight the over-powering drowsiness, but sighed as she finally surrendered to exhaustion.

“Hey!”

Light blazed in her eyes and she drew back from the glare. Two startled faces stared up at her.

“Who the hell are you, girl?!”

The two men weren’t too far beyond their teen years and looked hill-country skinny. Stubble dotted their faces and long, raw-boned hands stuck out of their shirt sleeves. One man held a lantern high above his head.

“Come over here, girl, so we can get a better look at you.”

Moochie pulled herself to her feet. She was still drowsy from her heavy sleep and disoriented by her rude awakening. Squinting, she looked around her.

The truck seemed to be stopped in some sort of farmyard. A rickety barn crouched before the truck. Brush and skinny trees hovered nearby. A chilly night wind gently ruffled Moochie’s hair.

“Come on over here, girl. Let’s see what we’ve got.” He got a hard edge to his voice when she still didn’t move. “Hurry up now and do as you’re told.”

Moochie stumbled as she picked her way through shadowy farm supplies. Her head was numb with sleep.

“Where do you reckon we picked her up, Luke?”

“Damned if I know. Could’ve been anywhere. Girl, don’t you know you’re trespassing? That’s a mighty serious law out in these parts. What do you reckon we should do about that? Reckon we should call the sheriff?”
From the way the other boy rolled his eyes, they didn’t need any sheriff snooping around them. Trouble was, Moochie wanted legal trouble less than they did.

“Tell you what, honey, if you’re real nice to us, we might forget the trespassing charge.”

From the way the other boy grinned, Moochie realized how she was expected to pay for her truck ride.

Luke could see that the girl wasn’t going to fight him any, just so he wouldn’t call in the Law. That’s when his plans got creative.

“I’ve been thinking, Cully. Just look at the legs on our new friend.”

Cully licked his chapped lips. ‘Yeah.”

“I bet she’s a dancer. I bet she done escaped from one of those carnivals that passes through here. How about it, honey?” he asked as he stroked her leg. “Are you one of them hootchie kootchie gals?” He laughed when Moochie closed her eyes in disgust. “Oh, yeah, you know what I’m talking about, all right. Cully, go get your radio.”

“You mean my portable?”

“Hell, yes! That damned thing you been plaguing me with all day.”

Cully scurried away for the pickup cab.

“How the hell the dimwit could forget that, I don’t know,” Luke said to Moochie as he stroked her leg again. He glared as she recoiled. “Better get friendlier than that, honey. A whole lot friendlier.”

“Here’s the radio, Luke. Hear? That record’s being played down in Nashville even as we speak.”

“Not that country-western shit, you dimwit. Here, give me that radio.” Luke fiddled with the dial and brought in various squawks and squeals until he settled on a New Orleans station. “Let’s see you dance to that song, honey.”

Moochie blinked. The music was a torchy, bluesy instrumental meant to be used in a strip joint. The two men leered up at her. Cully’s grin was lop-sided, but lust burned in his eyes.

Luke’s voice had a new hardness to it. “Come on, honey. Let’s see you strip. Or I’ll cut me a piss elm branch, soak it in water some, and whip your bare butt until the pee runs down your legs into your socks. You’ll be begging to dance for us long before I’m finished switching that tender ass you’ve got.”

Moochie had no doubt that he’d do just that, too. But her buttocks were hurting too much from the recent knife wounds to endure a beating. Tears trickled down her cheeks as she reached for her jacket buttons.


Luke grinned and rubbed his hands together. He glanced at the lantern to the side of the truck bed to make sure it was secure. They couldn’t let the truck get on fire, not with all the supplies they’d hauled home.

Moochie did a few sidesteps and flapped her jacket open a few times. The boys hooted. She put her head back and executed a circle while sawing the jacket down her arms. Cully slapped the truck bed
and reached to turn the music louder. Moochie beat the truck’s cargo twice with the jacket.

“Yah hoo!” Cully sashayed in a little circle of his own. Luke grinned at him. The boys had taken their eyes off their reluctant dancer.

Moochie whirled the jacket and snapped the lantern into the truck cargo. Flames shot up into the dark night.

“What the--”

Moochie dove off the truck bed and headed for the undergrowth of trees and underbrush.

“Jesus Christ!”

“Where’d she go, Luke?!”

“Forget her! We gotta save the truck! We can’t lose those supplies! Shit! Forget the truck! She’s gonna blow! Run!”

The percussion of the explosion sent Moochie sprawling to the ground. She rolled over and saw a fireball. A second fire roared to life nearby. The barn must be burning, too.


Moochie pulled herself to her feet and plunged blindly into the darkened thicket. Tears streamed down her face as she hiccuped and gagged. What a terrible price for those boys to pay for a few minutes of mischief.

She reached the top of a hill and looked back at the fire lighting up its part of the sky. Headlights were approaching in the near distance. Cully would have help soon.

Moochie trudged along the gravel road she’d found on the brow of the hill. She missed the warmth of the jacket she’d lost back at the fire. If Cully was smart enough, he wouldn’t implicate her. Any public knowledge of the events leading up to the fire would only harm Cully and Luke’s memory.

What bothered Moochie was that her crime spree was continuing. She didn’t intend being a bad girl, but evil things seemed to be happening to anybody who got near her. Would she always be saved and others hurt?

Somewhere along the road, she burrowed into a warm niche and slept. Her huge dinner had stretched her stomach, and she was hungry again. When she thought of poor Luke getting killed in the truck explosion and probably burning, she immediately lost her appetite.

Morning dawned clear and sunny with no indication of the previous night’s tragedy. Moochie had no idea where she was, but kept walking in a southwesterly direction, toward Texas and Daddy. Soon the gravel road led onto a blacktop with traffic. In a few minutes, she had a ride.

“You look exhausted, young lady,” the man reproved. He looked clean-cut, in his early forties, and had respectability written all over him. “Too tired to talk, huh? Well, that’s all right. You rest. We’ll be to a town soon. Then we’ll get you something to eat.”

She dozed, and the slowing of the car awakened her.

Her benefactor smile. “Feeling better? A good meal will fix you right up.”
She never knew that fried chicken, mashed potatoes, and coleslaw could taste so good. The man smiled as he wiped grease off her chin. Other patrons thought what a caring father he was.

“How do you like Arkansas? That’s right,” he said to the girl’s startled look. “You’re in Arkansas. We crossed the state line about an hour ago. This road goes southwest. Does that suit you?” He laughed as he saw her breathe deeply in satisfaction. “Guess it does. Here. Why don’t you crawl into the back seat and get some sleep? There’s a blanket back there that you can wrap up in.”

His offer seemed like a good idea. Drowsiness was washing over her in waves. She rolled over in the blanket and barely heard the car starting.

“Wake up, honey. Check out time. I can’t be taking you into Little Rock. My wife might find out.” Moochie sat up and started to pull herself out of the back seat. He pushed her back inside. She looked up, startled.

“Time to pay your bill, honey. Suppose you take off your clothes so I can see what I’ve purchased.” Moochie swallowed hard. She saw no escape. And she was stung by his duplicity. He was just as bad as the others. No, he was worse. She had trusted him.

Her clothing formed a puddle in a pile on the floorboard.

“Hmm. Awfully skinny, aren’t you? Good skin texture, though. What’s wrong with your titties? Looks like someone’s been carving nicks out of them. And recently, too. Hmm. Got your butt chewed up, too. You must lead some interesting life. And now you’ll have to add to your golden book of memories, won’t you?” he asked pleasantly. “I better do something special so you’ll remember me.” He reached down to expose himself.

Moochie dove for the door, but he shoved her back to the seat. “Don’t make me mad, honey. I can do things that you won’t like, things that’ll make you forget these little marks you already have.” He shoved her chest down with his forearm. “I can tape your mouth shut and gradually pinch your nose together. Your death dance would be rather energetic and quite thrilling for me because I’d be inside you. Trouble is, it couldn’t be repeated. And you’d have no memory of it. And I promised you a memory, didn’t I?”

He hummed softly the whole time. The dirty bastard hummed! Moochie bit down on her forearm and whimpered. When he finished, she covered her eyes with her arms and wept.

“Satisfying, but not unique. Here,” he said, handing her a tissue. “Clean yourself up. I don’t like weepy women, and I’m not through with you yet. This time, you have to get me interested.”

He shoved her to the floorboard between his legs and forced her to swallow him. It was the most disgusting thing she could’ve ever imagined, and it made her feel dirty and vile. Nausea rose in her throat, but he ordered her to keep swallowing or she’d strangle.

How long the nightmare lasted, she didn’t know. Her lips were aching and she hated the smell of his genital area. He was grunting like an animal and his grasping hands were hurting the back of her head.

At last he stiffened, shook, and lay against the seat with a contented sigh.

Moochie straightened and stared at him. As much as she hated him, she realized he’d taught her a very important lesson. He probably didn’t realize how important.
She had a power over him. She could have a power over all men. Perhaps this fact was what Granny Dalton had been trying to tell her and just couldn’t find the words. Women always have a power over men, and that power is sex.

She also knew she didn’t want any more lessons from this man. She bolted for the door before he could stop her.

“Hey! It’s dark out there!” No answer. “Better come back for your clothes!” He listened, but heard nothing. He began humming as he tidied himself up. He had to be presentable to his trusting wife. He paused to listen again before sliding behind the wheel. Twenty miles down the road, he discarded her clothing in a trash barrel.

The man didn’t know it, but Moochie hadn’t run very far. She sidestepped into a grader ditch, fainting as she fell. Early the next morning, she was found by a Deputy Sheriff on patrol.

Dawn was seeping into the bedroom where Amanda was rehashing the last of her memories. Jeb Fossey had been so kind when he told her about St. Louis. When she awoke in the grader ditch, she had no idea where she was or who she was. In Fossey’s home, she’d gradually remembered and had found the courage to face all the tragedy she’d witnessed in such a short time. And when he related the hit-and-run accident in St. Louis, everything had fallen into place and she’d remembered. She’d wept on Jeb’s shoulder, but still didn’t have the courage to speak. That was her last, invincible defense.

But she was starting to care for Jeb. She sensed his gentleness and his concern. He reminded her a lot of Silva. In fact, in her mind, Jeb Fossey was becoming Silva.
That afternoon, Amanda sat alone in the living room when Jeb charged in the front door. “Amanda? Have you seen Rachel? I thought she and Aunt Mildred wanted to see me here. Guess they’re late. Not watching television? Guess you’re reading those movie magazines again. Like those a lot, don’t you?” He smiled as he settled in his recliner.

“That must have been horrible for a young girl to have witnessed, seeing that pretty struck down so viciously by that reckless driver and everything thing. Oh, boy, there I went and made you cry again. Come over here, honey. That’s right. Sit on my lap. I know it’s difficult for you. Maybe we can get things straightened out for you, and you can get back to your people. Poor baby,” he soothed as he patted her back as she leaned against his shoulder. “I wish I could help you. I wish you could trust me enough to talk. Show me how to help you, honey. I’d do anything for you. You’re just a little mite of a thing, and too young to be away from your home. We need to be getting you back to where people love you and care for what happens to you. Not that we’re trying to do that for you right here in this town and this house. You’re just so easy to love. I’ll do anything for you. I swear it.”

Amanda’s tears gradually subsided. She thought she’d heard this plea before. The Negra had soothed her with warm hands, just like these hands. Perhaps Jeb Stuart Fossey didn’t realize the hidden meanings of their situation.

But Jeb was gradually becoming aware that the person on his lap was a desirable woman. He pushed that nasty thought back into the primitive part of his mind where it belonged. This girl was a grieving child that needed to be comforted.

But something in his massaging hands must’ve said otherwise. Something in the pressure of his arms must’ve offered more than comfort to her. Something in the sound of his murmured words suggested another activity to her.

The girl drew back and searched Jeb’s face. Jeb had never seen such awareness in her pale blue eyes. He’d become accustomed to her flat, disinterested stare. This new look startled him, and he was thrown off-guard.

Amanda slid to the floor between his legs. He sat fascinated while he watched her as she unzipped his slacks, reached inside his clothing, and withdrew his manhood with her tiny, dainty hands. It felt like a butterfly had captured him.

“Here, now,” he pleaded. “Don’t do that.”

But already the perspiration was popping onto his forehead. He stared, slack mouthed, at the soft smile of cunning on Amanda’s impish face. He knew her intentions, but he was powerless to stop her as she lowered his head.

Jeb had heard of things like this, things that certain women could do, would do, things that only spoke of depravity on the part of both partners. Rational people didn’t do these things, but they could dream. And apparently they did, considering the wealth of blue literature on the subject. A whole mythology had grown up about the topic. Such activity depended on the consent of the participants. Amanda seemed more that willing. Was he?

“No,” he said in a weak voice that would’ve startled him if he’d been in a normal state. “Amanda,
honey, you mustn’t be doing this. It ain’t right.” He didn’t say ‘we mustn’t be doing this,’ because he realized at this point that he had no will of his own. He was putty in her hands, her wonderful hands, her wonderful mouth, her wonderful tongue. Even his breathing had assumed a ragged, jerking quality that mirrored his whole body. He tangled his hands in Amanda’s stringy hair, relaxed his legs, and leaned back with his eyes shut. So this was what Heaven truly felt like.

Rachel’s voice came to Jeb in a distant fog when it was actually only a few feet away in the kitchen.

“Jeb beat us here, Aunt Mildred. His car’s out front. He must be in the living room. Let’s go see him.”

“No,” he moaned. Rachel was going to discover what he was doing. And she wasn’t going to be alone in the discovery. That old busybody Aunt Mildred was with her.

Maybe he could’ve pushed Amanda away a few minutes ago, but not now. He was going to be discovered, and he didn’t care. He didn’t care. Right now, nothing mattered except his life-or-death grip on Amanda’s head. His hands tightened as his face contorted in a violent strain. So near. So near. And now--!

A sharp intake of breath announced Rachel and Aunt Mildred. “Jeb! What’s going on?!”

He couldn’t immediately answer. He could barely hear through the roar in his head. His living room gradually returned to his line of vision. Jeb saw the chalk white of Rachel’s face and the crimson red of Aunt Mildred’s. The contrast was almost lovely.

“Jeb, what in the world are you doing?!”

It seemed almost humorous to Jeb that Rachel would think he was in any way in charge of the present situation. Perhaps no woman could possibly understand. Unless it was a woman such as Amanda. For Amanda was a woman. She definitely understood how to use a man’s bodily needs against himself. Jeb knew now that there was nothing childlike about her. He also knew that Rachel would blame him, not Amanda. He could see it in her eyes that were filling with the most intense hatred Jeb had ever seen. He shriveled in the presence of such loathing, because he knew he was the object of it. He doubted if even Amanda could revive his recent desire.

Why wild hilarity raced through Jeb he didn’t know. He was in the middle of the greatest tragedy of his life. Not even the motorcycle death of their son Benny seven years ago was equal to this agony. For they’d had each other then. And now Jeb had lost not only the love of his life, but his best friend. In one short, shattering moment everything was dead between them. He who’d been guilty of the casual flirtations Rachel had suspected but never proven was now innocent of the incident that would destroy him. For he would be nothing without Rachel. She was, that is, had been, his stability, his reason for living. Now all of that was gone. He saw it in her eyes.

An hour later, Noreen knocked on the front door and bounced into the living room. “Well, we’re off next week. Curt told his folks and they couldn’t be happier.” Noreen looked at her parents’ strained faces and the look of loss on her daughter’s tear-stained face. “What’s wrong? What happened?”

“You’ll have to take Clara with you. In fact, I may be going along, too.”

“Mama? I don’t understand. What about Daddy? Where’s he going?”

“He can go to Hell, for all I care.”
“Maw?”

“You see to your daughter, Noreen. I’m through baby-sitting. It’s about time you learned responsibility for your actions.”

“Did Clara do something wrong?”

“No. She’s innocent for a change.”

“Maw? Daddy? What’s wrong? Will someone tell me?”

“I’m leaving your father.”

The enormity of the statement could not be absorbed quickly by Noreen. Whatever had ever happened before, Noreen had always seen her parents as a solid front. And now her mother was leaving?

“You’re leaving this house? You’ve lived here since you got married. What about your things?”

“I don’t want them. I used them to make a home, and this isn’t a home anymore.”

“But Grandma Plackett’s dishes. You love them so. You were going to pass them on to Dennis and me.”

“You two can have them now. I’m tired of being a caretaker so everyone else can run around. I’m going to live a little. Maybe I can get a little romancing on the side.” She frowned. “Hell, why not?!”

Jeb grimaced. “Rachel, don’t do this to yourself, Hon.”

Rachel turned rage-filled eyes on Jeb. “It’s taking all my self-control to keep from killing you with my bare hands, Jeb STUART Fossey! So don’t ‘Hon’ me!”

“Maw!”

Noreen put protective hands on Jeb, but he brushed them aside. “Daddy?” But nobody was important to him except Rachel.

Tears pooled in a puddle in Noreen’s eyes. “Maw, you gotta tell me what’s wrong! What happened?!”

Rachel’s venomous words were directed at Jeb’s back. “He insulted me. He humiliated me. But worst of all, he betrayed me.”

“But, but, how?”

Rachel focused her attention on Noreen. “I’ll tell you later. Right now, help Clara get her clothes together while I get mine.”

Jeb turned great, pain-filled eyes on Rachel and looked helpless. “You’re leaving me alone?”

“You’ll have Amanda,” she snapped, and her eyes flashed.

“But what should we do without you?”

“You can figure something out. Screw her, for all I care. Try that, for variety.”
Noreen gasped behind her.

Rachel marched toward the stairs. “Do whatever you want with that little slut. You’ll have the house to yourselves.”

Noreen looked helplessly at her grieving father, then followed her mother.

Amanda awoke earlier than usual. It was the time of morning when the world paused for the day. Sounds traveled for a long distance, because most creatures were still asleep. Amanda heard a dog barking and knew it could be blocks away.

The Fossey house was quiet. At last. Rachel had raged through it for hours, gathering clothes and belongings haphazardly. Clara had wept silently in the living room, the television cold and forgotten. Gone was Clara’s insolence. She was a different child. Her world had collapsed.

Noreen was different, too. She grew up almost noticeably as she sought to placate her mother. But there was no reasoning with Rachel. She left, at last, near two-thirty in the morning. Clara and Noreen went with her. Noreen’s boyfriend Curt was in for a shock. He was about to get three generations of women going with him on his wild hair adventure to Alaska. That ought to be a merry addition to whatever quiet village in Alaska in which they eventually would land.

But back at the Fossey’s home during that strange night, the house had quieted gratefully after the departure of Rachel, Noreen, and Clara. Amanda had even managed to sleep and, amazingly, to rest. Maybe having sex does that for a person.

But now it was morning, and time for action. Amanda dressed quickly in the early dawn light and shoved her other clothing into a paper sack. She peeked into the master bedroom, but it was empty. Jeb must be somewhere, but Amanda wasn’t looking for him.

A box of body powder lay dumped on the floor of the master bedroom. Shoe prints tracked wildly across the dark carpeting. Dresses hung at crazy angles off hangers. Jeb’s good suit reeked of perfume and sported dried shaving cream in waving circles across it. The mess of perfume and shaving cream had ruined the material of the expensive suit. Rachel had bought it for Jeb for their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. The carnage could speak no more eloquently of Rachel’s hatred. Rachel had always warned him not to betray her.

Amanda found what she was seeking. Rachel was the type to hide small amounts of money for emergencies. Rachel hadn’t thought of all of her hiding places in her haste and anger. For Amanda, it would be her traveling money. She also added a frilly nightgown to her stash. Rachel wouldn’t be needing it anymore. And Amanda could use it in her dealings with men.

Amanda tiptoed downstairs and crossed the living room toward the front door. A movement scared her, but it was only Heidi the dachshund creeping out from her hiding place behind the sofa. Rachel’s tirade had frightened her, and only now did the dog dare to reappear when she saw Amanda.

“You have to stay here,” Amanda whispered to Heidi. The dog turned her head in wonder, not recognizing a voice she’d never heard before.

Amanda grinned. “Don’t know me, do you, Heidi, girl? Well, I’m Mary Grace Dalton and I’m from
southeastern Ohio, one of the loneliest places on earth. I’m on my way to live with my daddy. He’s down in Texas somewhere. Reckon I’ll find him someday. Nice knowing you, Heidi. You’ve been a good friend. Don’t take any wooden nickels.”

Amanda opened the door to let herself out. Then on a whim, she held the door further open. Heidi slipped past her and ran joyfully outside to keep a rendezvous with any loose dogs on the prowl. That’d be more fun than any arranged marriage to a proper dachshund gentleman.

Amanda grinned. Everything should be free. She was sure glad she was. And part of what made her free was knowing she could take care of herself. She’d been such a backward, sniveling oaf when she’d left Ohio. But now she knew a secret. She knew how to make men happy, and that knowledge could take her anywhere.

She was whistling as she walked to the highway to catch a ride. Who would be the lucky (or unlucky) man today?

Jeb sat at the kitchen table in the gray morning dawn. He’d heard faint stirrings in the house and knew Amanda was up and about. They’d spent several hours together alone in the house, but he hadn’t sought her out. He might kill her if he did. His life had been destroyed by her. Besides, they couldn’t repeat yesterday’s exotic moment. That thrill couldn’t come someone’s way twice in a lifetime.

Jeb knew the dogs were hungry and needed to be fed. He knew he should feed himself, too. But all that seemed real was the cold weight of the revolver in his hand.

In civilized man lurks a sleeping savage. He dozes lightly. Not much is required to awaken him, and civilized man is thrown back into his most primitive feelings. But civilized man, with thousands of years of conditioning and experience in his favor, can subdue the savage and force him back into his cave. Sometimes.

Jeb had lost everything. Worse yet, there was little chance of restoring his loss. If he had the courage, he’d shoot himself.

And for what? What had warranted such a sacrifice? Was experiencing something that most people would only ever dream worth losing his family, his job, his respect, his very life?

There’d been no anticipation and barely no recollection of something that had lasted only a few brief moments. And because of the actions of those few moments, Jeb would forever be an outcast from the ones he was supposed to hold most dear. Had it been worth it?

The clock ticked loudly in the quiet house. Jeb holstered his gun and straightened his shoulders.

--something that most people would only ever dream about--

He grinned. Hell, yes, it was worth it! Amanda had given him a rare gift. He knew he should feel ashamed and lost, but instead he breathed deeply and felt proud and privileged. Rachel always had been a prig.

Where in the hell did she keep the dog food? These damn dogs were starving! And they weren’t the only things in this house needing succor. Jeb had some living to do, and he was gonna make damn sure he got it done.
Mary Grace caught a ride with a couple driving a fancy Plymouth. They were young, in their early thirties. Mary Grace got to sit up front with the driver because his companion was sitting in the back. The red-haired woman peeped over the seat, blinked at Mary Grace, and disappeared into the murky darkness in back.

“Where you going, child?” the man asked pleasantly. He had slicked down black hair and the longest fingers Mary Grace had ever seen. In fact he seemed to scrunch down in the big car as if it wasn’t large enough for him, either.

What’d decided her to take their ride was the Texas license plate on their car. Might as well tell them the truth since the truth wasn’t going to be hurting her none.

“Texas, sir,” she lisped.

The man grinned and glimpsed in the mirror at the woman in the back seat. “Hear that, Mavis? This young lady’s got real manners. Mighty refreshing in today’s children, don’t you think?”

A mumbling and then a clinking came from behind them.

“You’ll have to excuse my wife. She’s feeling poorly, otherwise she would’ve been talking your hind leg off by now.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry. Maybe I shouldn’t have asked you for a ride.”

“That’s all right. You won’t disturb her none. And I’ll enjoy the company. You got family down in Texas?”

“Yes, sir. My daddy lives down around Houston.”

“We’re not going that far south, but you’re welcome to ride as far as we’re going in your direction.”

“Thank you, sir. I’d appreciate it.”

“Actually, we’re headed for West Texas. We’ve been visiting my wife’s people back in Valdosta, Georgia. Leaving them upsets her sometimes.”

From the smell coming from the back seat, Mary Grace figured Mavis was soothing herself with alcohol.

Crossing into the state of Oklahoma had taken them through the beautiful Ouachita Mountains, and Mary Grace felt a pang of homesickness for the hills back home. True, her town hadn’t been in such a mountainous area, but it reminded her of all she’d once known. In better times, when Momma and Papa had still been married to each other, they’d all driven down into the wilds of West Virginia. Mary Grace had loved it and had wondered if she’d been descended from the Indians who’d once hunted there.

“Are you sad, Sarah?”

For a moment, she didn’t know who Trenton (for that was his name) was talking to. Then she remembered that was what she was calling herself with these people.

“The mountains are so lovely,” she answered.

“Was your home in the mountains?”

I’m going there someday soon. My daddy must live near the seashore.”

The man smiled. “Then you’ll be happy to part company with us and head toward him. You won’t want to be going where we’re headed. Most of Texas is hot and flat.”

“Then why live there?”

The man smiled pleasantly again. “Because that’s where my job is.”

“Do you enjoy what you do?”

“Working in the oil fields? No.”

“Then why do it?”

“Money, Sarah. Money. Someday, I’ll make enough to take Mavis back home to Georgia and buy into my daddy’s cotton mill. Then we’ll be set up for life. This Texas thing is just temporary until we can get back on our feet.”

“How long will that take,?”

He was still smiling as he looked at her, but his dark eyes had a hard glint to them. “Now you sound just like Mavis.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to pry, sir.”

“ Doesn’t make much sense, does it? But we’re all driven by private devils. Mavis back there is upset because she could never win a beauty contest. She always came in second best. And now she can’t seem to have any babies, even though we’ve been married five years. And her kid sisters are shelling out kids like they were Georgia peanuts. Me—” He sighed. “Me, I can’t please my daddy. Back when I was in college, I was something of a football player for Georgia Tech and something of a skirt chaser. My daddy decided right then that I had no place in his business. And, you know, I’ve been trying to bust my tail ever since to prove that he was wrong. And all I’ve ever proved was that he was right.” He flashed her a brilliant smile that failed to hide his annoyance. “Funny old world, isn’t it, Sarah? What’s your private devil? Or aren’t you old enough to have any?”

It was hard to think about his questions. People don’t like to undergo self-examination. And Mary Grace was no exception. But, again, she spoke with as much truth as she could muster to this man, this stranger.

“Ignorance.”

“Ignorance. Yes, ignorance. But don’t think that’s a private devil reserved only for the young. You just happen to be smart enough to admit it.”

Trenton turned on the radio then, and they listened to music for awhile. Mary Grace sensed the deep hurting within him. She felt sorry for him because he seemed like such a nice man. But she knew other people were secretly hurting, too. It was like a film was slowly being lifted from her eyes since she’d left Ohio, and she knew other people’s pain. Had she been protected that much back home? Had she really been that naive?

Trenton turned the radio down. “Do you like progressive jazz, Sarah?”

“Is that what that is?”
“I saw you frowning at the radio.”

“I didn’t mean to. I like most music, but I couldn’t seem to follow the melody.”

“The fault’s not with you. I’ll turn on something you can enjoy.”

“Oh, don’t do that, sir. This is your car. You can listen to whatever you want.”

“Now, that’d be awfully selfish of me, wouldn’t it?” The radio squawked and honked as he flipped around the dial. “What kind of music do you like?”

“I don’t know much music, sir. Mostly hymns and country ballads. And I do so love the beautiful songs out of the movies.”

“A movie buff, eh? Go to the shows much?”

“Oh, no, sir, there isn’t any money for that. But I do like to read about the movie stars and their lives. Makes me feel like I’m sharing their lives with them. But, of course, I’m not. I like to pretend, though.”

“Nothing wrong with pretending. Here. Here’s the station for you. Easy listening. They play pretty songs all day.”

Her face lit up with rapture. “Oh, that’s FEELINGS, isn’t it? How nice.”

“You know, Sarah, there’s all kinds of music you can hear. I’ve got a theory about it. I think music is the heartbeat of America. It, above ideologies, above freedom, above almost anything you can mention, makes us one nation. It touches us differently, yet the same.” He nodded at the radio. “A novelist could write a whole page and not convey one-tenth of the emotion felt in one line of that song. Music truly is the universal language.” He turned up the volume so they could listen as they sped across Oklahoma.

That night, they rented double room on the Texas side of the Red River.

“You’re getting further away from Houston with every mile, Sarah. Tomorrow, we’ll be headed southwest of Wichita Falls and that’ll put you clear out of the way you’re going. Maybe you can catch a bus.”

“I don’t have that kind of money, Trenton. Besides, I like being with you folks.”

“I know. You’re good company, too. But that doesn’t put you any closer to your daddy. Maybe we can find a good ride for you in the morning.”

Mavis didn’t eat much supper, and Mary Grace helped Trenton put her to bed. The woman had a voluptuous body. Mary Grace could understand why Trenton loved her, in spite of her weakness for alcohol.

She and Trenton looked down at the slumbering woman, demurely clothed in a cotton nightly and decently covered with a warm blanket. Trenton’s face reflected his tiredness, but he still could manage a smile.

“Do you want to curl up safely in a chair or be comfortable in this other bed with me? Chivalry isn’t necessarily dead, but I’m tired and I did pay for the room.”

His proposition wasn’t what shocked her. “But Mavis is so much prettier than me.”
“And she’s also so much more drunker. You know I’m here; she doesn’t.”

“Won’t she mind? I mean, if—”

“She didn’t ask me if I minded if she got stinking. Make me forget about her, if only for a little while. Make me forget about a daddy I can’t please and a job I hate. There’s all kinds of music to learn about, Sarah. Let’s listen to some together.”

So she climbed into his bed and soothed him and loved him. Mavis mumbled in her sleep and startled Sarah, but Trenton drew her back into his arms and thanked her for the night with a lazy smile.

Mary Grace awoke with a start. Mavis stood over their bed. The towel wrapped around her body and her damp red hair said she’d just stepped out of the shower. Mary Grace expected all hell to bust loose, but Mavis simply tossed aside her towel with a yip and jumped in bed with them.

Two hours later they left the motel a whole lot friendlier with each other. Mary Grace was slightly dazed. She’d never touched a woman THAT way before and she was fascinated. All she could think about was the motel waiting for them at the end of that day’s journey and their home at the end of the trip where she could probably stay as long as she wanted. After all, after the night they had shared together, they were family now.

But while eating breakfast at the truck stop, Trenton found a ride for her headed southeast towards Houston.

“But, Trenton—”

“I wanted you to come with us, sweetheart. You’d be good for us. But it might not be the best thing for you.”

“Oh, yes, it would. You could become my world.”

“I know. That’s what’s wrong. You have your own life, Sarah. You need to find it.” He squeezed her hands in a quick goodbye and gave her a sad smile. “We cross many paths in a lifetime. May your path lead you to home.”

Tears smarted her eyes. “Fight the brave battle with demons.” She kissed his cheek, gave Mavis a quick hug, and jumped into the waiting car.

She cried softly for the first few miles, then realized how impolite she was being. She blew her nose and dried her eyes. Trenton and Mavis were a beautiful, fragile memory, and that’s all they would ever be to her from now on.

“I want to thank you folks for letting me ride with you.”

The nondescript woman in the front seat turned gentle eyes on her. “That’s all right, Sarah. And it’s all right if you weep. It’s always difficult to leave good friends.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” she murmured and was amazed at how sincere she felt about the parting. She’d known Mavis and Trenton only a day, but had felt very close to them. But she would make new friends. She squared her shoulders.

“Do you folks live in Houston?”

“No, near Waco. But that’s just a hop, skip, and jump from Houston.” She smiled. The gesture didn’t make her prettier, but it made any recipient feel better.
Mary Grace relaxed.

She left the couple near Waco. She knew they’d try to be too helpful, so she slipped away from them at a truck stop. She accepted a ride with a trucker and discovered too late that he was headed for Austin, not Houston. When she finally got away from him three days later in San Antonio, her only concern was to put distance between him and her. He’d been brutish to her in the truck’s sleeper compartment and practically held her prisoner on their journey.

Houston was straight east of San Antonio, but she crawled in a battered old Chevy headed northwest out of town. Her brutish truck driver would be expecting her to head for Houston, and she didn’t want to see him ever again.

She rode silently in the old car with the middle-aged salesman. He kept looking at her and she knew what was on his mind. But she was tired, so tired, of men and their pawing hands. Could she go through another night of some lecherous man slobbering over her and expecting her to fulfill his warped sexual fantasies? How much did she owe for just some transportation?

He stopped at a motel near Junction and she ran blindly into the night. She didn’t pause to grab anything; she just started putting one foot in front of the other. Virtually. Lost were her possessions in his car. Lost was her sanity. Nobody just took out into the night, with no plan, with just one foot in front of the other.

The land was thinning here and turning to desert. Or so it seemed. Surely this was just poor farm ground in some rolling hills somewhere. Nothing much was here, nothing much that could help her. But still she ran. Past houses with twinkling lights. Past warm kittens and tasty suppers waiting on tables covered with plaid oilcloths. Past homes offering hospitality to anyone but her.

Then, from out of nowhere, strong arms caught her in the darkness.

“Who that?”

She screamed and fought. Tears flowed down her face. It’d been a man’s voice. Another man held her.

“What’s going on? Who you got there, Lucius?”

A woman’s voice. Another Mavis? She screamed again.

“Don’t know, Mammy. She fights like a wildcat.”

A flashlight beam blinded Mary Grace.

“White girl, Lucius. Better let her go.”

In the swinging light, Mary Grace saw that it was a young black man who held her. Silva! Silva had come to save her! She threw her arms around his neck and sobbed.

“Let her go, I say!”

“I can’t, Mammy! Now she’s got a hold of me.”

“Let’s get her into the house and hope no white man catches us.”

Mary Grace ceased struggling. She would be taken into a refuge. Silva would see that she’d be safe. Light from the fireplace flickered softly on Mary Grace as she lay on the cot. She was calm now.
They had fed her and warmed her with rough wool blankets. She knew she was safe now, and she also knew it hadn’t been Silva who’d saved her. She was filled with an infinite sadness for his memory, and she felt that she was grieving for him as she’d never been allowed to grieve before.

The large, gentle-faced black woman sat on the cot beside her and stroked her arm. “That’s all right, baby. You just cry and get it all out of your system. You’re safe now. Ain’t nobody going to hurt you in Mammy Cordelia’s home. No, sir.” She needlessly straightened the blanket. “Someone hurt you real bad, didn’t they, honey?”

Mary Grace turned toward the wall. It wasn’t only that the trucker had been mean; he wouldn’t let her go. She had been his prisoner.

“That’s all right. No need to talk now. You rest.”

“You going to let her stay, Mammy?”

“Hush now, Lucius. You can see I am. I swear I don’t know how you got so stupid. Must be from your pappy.”

“And he say it come from the Natchez man. Who was the Natchez man, Mammy?”

“You hush now. You’re too young to know about him.”

“I’m twenty-five years old, Mammy. When will I ever be old enough?” He nodded toward the cot.

“What’s William Lee going to say about her?”

Mary Grace went to sleep listening to their wrangling and wondering who William Lee was. She learned the answer to that the next morning when she was awakened by an angry voice.

“Who you found to bring home now, Mammy?!”

“You hush, William Lee. She ain’t none of your concern. Scrape your shoes and sit down at the table now. The cornmeal mush is about ready.”

“As long as I live under this roof, anything that goes on in here is my concern. I ain’t no simpleton like Lucius.”

“You hush! He’ll hear you!”

“He’s bright enough to know what he is.”

Mary Grace rolled over on the cot and faced them.

“Save us, sweet Jesus! This girl is white, Mammy!”

“I know that, boy. I put that nightgown on her.”

“But, but, white! Lord save us all!”

“Now, a little mite of a thing like she is ain’t going to be hurting us none. She come to us out of the night. Ran straight into your brother’s arms. She needed us.”

“I’m sure now that the Lord is watching out for you two. You sure as hell ain’t!”

“William Lee, I will not have any of that kind of Devil language in my home!”
The young black man turned to Mary Grace. “What’s your story, girl? Where you from?” He was younger than Lucius, but had the same lanky build. Intelligence sparkled in his eyes, and also anger. “Well?”

“She don’t talk, William Lee.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know. Some injury, some shock, some defect in her birthing, maybe. Could be caused by just about anything.”

“I don’t know where you find them all, Mammy. Must be some sign they recognize that’s pointing straight to you, like the hobos read out on the railroad tracks about places that will treat them good and feed them.” His voice was low with suppressed anger. “They see the sign pointing to you, and they come a’running. And I don’t know why you keep them.”

“Because Jesus asked me to.”

“Mammy-- Mammy, where do you get an idea like that?”

“From meeting. Wouldn’t hurt you none to go to meeting.” She talked through his groan. “You need to settle down.”

“Mammy--”

“Settle down with some nice gal. That pretty little Dacia Henry would be willing.”

“But I ain’t, Mammy. Why can’t you understand that?”

“I understand I got me one boy who don’t know what girls are really for and another boy who does, but don’t want to pledge himself to just one. I ain’t never going to be a legal grandmother this way!”

“How did your mother get around it?”

Mammy Cordelia cracked him across the mouth with her open hand. “You is legal! And, and, and Lucius was meant to be, only, well, sometimes, things don’t get done the way they was meant. But that don’t mean the intention wasn’t there!”

William Lee rubbed the red patch on his face. “Better tend to your company. She’s awake.” He glared at Mary Grace, as if she was responsible for his disgrace being witnessed. “I’ll call Lucius for breakfast.”

As he stomped away, Mary Grace realized she had acquired an enemy.

Mammy Cordelia and Lucius were solicitous and curious, but Mary Grace decided to let silence be her answer to their questions. Answers would only bring on more questions from them, and some things in her immediate past defied explanation, even to her.

In the days that followed, Mary Grace rested. She felt comfortable in their humble shack, especially when William Lee wasn’t there, which was most of the time, thank goodness. The family didn’t try to question her once they decided she was mute. Lucius, in his simple-minded way, attended her every need like a puppy dog. He liked to show her the animals they kept in the woodshed and the barn. Mammy Cordelia dressed her in some flowing white gauzy material and treated her like the fairy child she appeared to be.
What seemed most familiar about their way of living was the camp meetings. At first, the other black people looked at Mary Grace with suspicion and even fear. But soon they accepted her as another misfit taken in by Mammy Cordelia. Some, like Dacia Henry, still hung back. Mary Grace knew that was who the girl had to be. Why else would she glare at Mary Grace from a group of curious teenage girls? Dacia was slender bone skinny, some might say, sassy in the twist of her sweet hips, and arrogant in the upward tilt of her pointed chin. She was probably jealous of Mary Grace because of William Lee, but she need not have worried. The white girl had few thoughts about him.

One day as they met and passed in the farmyard, William Lee hissed at her, “What do you want around here, girl? Why are you staying at my mammy’s house?” He glared at the round eyes staring back at him. “You may not be able to talk, but I bet you understand everything I say. Well, watch your step around me, girl. I won’t let you hurt my family. They’re too trusting, but I’m not!”

She watched him march away, thinking he needed something to believe in and somewhere positive to channel his anger.

Before long, the daily hum of life around the humble shack, the camp meetings, and the people living in the small farming community became a comfortable routine to Mary Grace. Familiar, too, were the magic potions, the watching of the moon, the knowledge that there was more to nature than what the scientists told. For Mammy Cordelia had mystic powers. She knew the old ways, the skills that had been handed down from slave cabins and before that from Africa.

“Wish I could think of some magic potion to bring back your voice, child. Bet you can sing like the angels. My pretty baby needs to be whole.” She pulled herself out of her chair and lumbered across the room. “My lumbago’s been acting up again. Must be going to rain.” She glanced out the window. “Storm clouds building up. Now where’s that fool Lucius? Doesn’t have sense to come in out of the rain and he’ll get soaked.” She lumbered toward the door. “Thought William Lee would be home long before this, too. I swear, those two boys are going to be the death of me yet.”

Mary Grace was only half listening. She’d been thinking about some way to ‘regain’ her voice, too. She didn’t want to pretend with these people anymore, but she didn’t want to lose the mystery that surrounded her, either. Being the same as other people would make her seem commonplace. Besides, she’d have to think of some good answers to their questions if she could talk. William Lee, especially, would demand answers.

“Now where’s that fool boy?” Mammy Cordelia sighed. “Might as well go look for him before the storm breaks. Likely as not, he’s out in the chicken run, trying to pet those old hens again. The whole lot of them, fowl and fool child, need to be in where it’s safe and dry. Wind’s picking up, too.”

Unbidden, Mary Grace had followed Mammy Cordelia outside. Leaves were blowing off trees and dust whipped in their faces.

Mammy Cordelia squinted against the debris. “Pull on them rubber boots, child! You’re barefooted! Don’t want you to step on anything out here. Go look in the barn for Lucius. He likes to visit the animals out there. He ain’t with the chickens.”

Mary Grace did as she was ordered, pushing into the wind and finally entering the old barn. The building was hot and dusty. Pigs and hens sneaking nests and geese milled around, nervous about the approaching storm. But Lucius was not among them.

Mary Grace left the barn and saw Mammy Cordelia standing with William Lee near the house. His pickup was parked nearby. He’d apparently just arrived. Mammy Cordelia was flailing the air with her hands, signaling the girl to hurry. The storm was fixing to cut loose hard at any moment. The girl tried to run across the yard, but was slowed by her rubber boots. She lost her balance, but caught
herself by grabbing the steel frame of the nearby windmill. She heard Mammy Cordelia scream and saw her point upwards. Mary Grace released her handhold a split second before the lightening struck the windmill.

Lightening crackled around the child. Her wispy blonde hair stood out from her head in all directions. The power of the universe coursed through her veins and turned them into rivers of fire. Smoke might even have come out of her ears.

“The child is dead!” Mammy yelled. “Oh, dear Lord God in Heaven, she’s dead!”

True, if Mary Grace hadn’t been wearing the rubber boots, she might’ve died. True, if she’d touched the windmill while it was vibrating with thousands of volts of electricity running through it, she would’ve fried on the spot. But she stood, rooted to the earth, aware of all eternity, feeling the heartbeat of the universe. She was one with the Maker of all Creation. And she was exhilarated. She was unafraid. She was free.

The heavy black woman lumbered forward, tears streaming down her face. “Child! Child!”

William Lee followed. “Mammy, don’t touch her!”

But Cordelia grabbed the girl’s arm and electricity coursed through her, too. But it was a weakened charge, and Cordelia promptly found herself sprawled flat on the ground on her round, fat butt.

“Mammy, you all right? I told you not to touch her,” William Lee asked cautiously as he leaned over his mother.

White eyes rolled in Cordelia’s sweating, black face. “My lumbago! It’s cured!”

“That’s not so, Mammy. You just got a shock. Your lumbago will come back.”

“I tell you I’m cured!” Cordelia heaved herself to her feet and danced in a little circle. William Lee stared at his mother. He hadn’t seen her move like that since he’d been a small child.

“Mammy, maybe you better come on into the house before you hurt yourself good.”

She stopped and glared at him. “Don’t mess with me, boy. I know a miracle when I sees one. And this sweet child done cured me. Thank you, little angel.”

The storm, after its one mighty blow on the windmill, seemed to be passing without dumping its cloud-belly-load of dark rain. Even the freshly torn leaves from trees were refusing to budge from their repose on the dusty ground.

And Mary Grace, who by this time was recovered from her electrifying experience even though her hair still stood out in a halo, quite forgot herself and spoke. “It is I who should be thanking you, Mammy Cordelia. You and your family took me in and have been good to me.”

Mother and son stared at each other. Cordelia was the first to recover. “Praise the Lord! The child is so gifted that she has cured herself!”

Even William Lee was filled with wonder. “And we took her in. Are we blessed in your sight, sweet child?”

Mary Grace was nearly struck dumb for real. The true miracle had been wrought in William Lee. There was no mockery, no anger, no hostility in his eyes. He truly believed in her.
“Yes, William Lee, you are.”

“I ain’t never seen nothing like it,” he said in awe. “You should’ve been struck down dead, but you’re alive and been made whole.” He stepped forward to touch her, but she held up her hand in denial. “Of course. I’m not worthy.” He dropped to his knees and kissed the hem of her skirt.

Mary Grace felt herself go hot and cold as she stared down at his bent head. She’d denied him not because he was unworthy, but because she feared she would knock him down with her touch. She felt the charge of electricity still coursing through her body. Who knew if she could ever touch anyone again, for their own safety. Merely hugging someone might kill that person.

But beyond that concern, she knew she had received a gift. If she used it sparingly, it might last her for years. To dissipate its strength by rashly using it would throw the gift away. If there was one thing she’d learned since leaving southeastern Ohio, it was cunning. How naive she’d been back home, how trusting in the old ways. But other folks believed in the old traditions, too. They wanted to believe in miracles. They wanted an easy cure. They wanted some magic in their dull lives. And Mary Grace could provide it. Besides, she couldn’t let William Lee think he’d been humiliated a second time by her.

“You and Lucius and Mammy Cordelia are precious to me, William Lee. Even as precious as the good folk who took in Jesus when He was on Earth.”

William Lee gasped and his eyes enlarged. “You mean you—” Oh, how he wanted to believe in her.

“There are many mysteries in life, William Lee. You must accept without questioning.” Oh, how every word was a nail in her cage.

“And you healed my mammy because she’s a good woman?”

“Yes, and because she believed, William Lee.” Oh, the nails. But she believed, too. The lightening had fried her and she had not died. “The healing was in your mother. I am merely the instrument.” How thankful she was that she’d paid attention at all those camp meetings back in Ohio!

Mary Grace was no mere charlatan. She believed that the lightening had been a Divine Plan to give her a power to help people. Surely, now, her vagabond life would have some meaning. Surely, now, she could assume that she was home. Her journey to find her father had really been a preparation for a higher calling. Finding Papa was no longer important. Possessing the Power was. Using the Power was. And she would use it judiciously with the wisdom and knowledge gained from her journey.

But there would be sacrifices for her. Sadly, she realized she could never have another sexual encounter. Her energy would be lost foolishly through coitus. Like Merlin the Wizard, she would have to remain celibate to retain her Power. Besides, the electricity charging through her might electrocute a lover with her orgasm.

They found Lucius in the woodshed playing with a litter of newborn puppies. He had never even heard the storm. But he was full of tales about the puppies.

Life in the humble shack changed forever. Mary Grace couldn’t love men, but what about masturbation? She tingled, thinking about the ‘charge’ she could give herself. And, on a practical note, mightn’t that practice be the way for her to regenerate herself? Or would she have to run her foot over carpeting or wait for another passing electrical storm? She giggled with the ridiculous prospect.

Mary Grace worked simple cures at camp meetings. People were stunned as her electricity coursed
through their bodies and went away thinking themselves healed. What amazed Mary Grace was that they continued to stay healed. How great was the power of suggestion! Or, maybe she really was curing people.

William Lee became her constant bodyguard. With all the new confusion, Lucius had lost interest in her and went back to his animals. Mary Grace would’ve been less anxious about William Lee if he’d been trying to expose her. But he REALLY BELIEVED in her powers.

One afternoon in a playful scuffle, William Lee shoved Lucius toward Mary Grace who agilely sidestepped contact with his body. William Lee stomped away.


“Wait, Lucius, I’ll go talk to him. You take the puppies back to their momma. Go on now.” She hurried after the other brother. “William Lee? William Lee!” She stepped around a persimmon tree. “Oh, here you are. What’s going on, William Lee? Why did you deliberately push Lucius toward me?”

“I thought you loved Lucius!” he yelled at her.

“I do. I love all of you. You’re my family now.”

“You’re a fraud then!” Tears swam in his dark eyes. “If you love my brother, why won’t you heal his head and make him whole?!”

“I can’t. It’s true. I can’t heal some things.”

“I knew it! You’re a fraud!”

“I can’t heal some things, William Lee, because they don’t need healing. Some things are the way they were meant to be. And it’s not because I can’t heal, it’s because I shouldn’t. I heal through God. But I can’t be God. It can’t be my decision. Only God can decide. Do you understand?”

“You mean my brother was meant to be simpleminded?”

“Yes.”

“I can’t believe that! I can’t believe that was God’s intention.”

“Then what do you think was His intention?”

“For Lucius to be a test for you!”

“Oh, no, William Lee, I think he was meant to be a test for you.”

“For me?! What do you mean?!”

“Lucius’ condition is a test to see if you and Mammy Cordelia can accept His will!”

“I don’t believe that! I don’t believe a poor child should be afflicted just to test someone else!”

“Oh, William Lee, I wish I had the right to change Lucius’ head. But I wish harder that I could heal your heart.”

“Ain’t nothing wrong with my heart!”
“Oh, yes, there is. Otherwise, you wouldn’t have so much bitterness in yourself. You need to accept Lucius just the way he is. He has. And you need to forgive Mammy Cordelia for loving too easily in her youth. And you need to let that sweet Dacia Henry love you and bring you into your manhood.”

“How can you say that about Dacia Henry being my intended without your tongue shriveling up dry in your throat?!” he hissed. “How can you say that when we both know it’s a lie?!” He drew several rapid breaths as his eyes blazed into hers. “How can you say that when we both know you’re the woman for me?”

Her lips parted as the truth struck her. He was right. She didn’t just love him. She was in love with him, just as he was with her. And he’d realized it first. Apparently, a long time ago.

“Don’t you know how miserable I am from wanting you, girl? From wanting you in my bed?! Surely, you know that.”

“Yes,” she answered softly. “I know that.” Then she realized that she had to be firm, that he couldn’t be. “And know this, too, William Lee. A relationship like that with you would drain my powers. And you might even die from an electrical shock, if I so much as touched you. Can you imagine what I might do to you if we did the other? I can’t chance that.”

He frowned. “And you gotta stay--whole?”

“I’m not whole, William Lee. Up to a short time ago, I was pure and innocent. But in the last few weeks, I’ve seen and experienced some terrible things. I think it was to prepare me for my conversion.” She bit her lower lip and a tear slid down her cheek. “I am not a pure vessel. I have gained knowledge of the world, no matter how backward and even crude the education. I thought it was so I could survive in the real world on its terms. Now, I think it was to suffer, to purge myself, to ready myself for my real mission. And I think you are to be my lieutenant. I need you with me, William Lee, but not as my lover. Our relationship must remain pure, otherwise we will destroy each other. We must go out and minister to the world. And you must bring a helpmate with you so our good names will not be sullied. Do you hear me, William Lee? My beloved? This will be your greatest test of all.”

“Or my greatest punishment.”

Her eyes burned into his. “Mine, too.”

William Lee fell to his knees sobbing. The hem of her dress brushed the top of his bent head. His hand trembled toward her leg. So near, so near. But he did not touch her. Her tears dripped off her chin and burned his flesh where they struck him, and he knew what she told him was true.

“Be strong for me, my beloved,” she whispered. “The test of denial of the flesh will be our salvation, and our hell.”

The scene was a catharsis for her feelings for Silva. Her sweet angel had never heard her speak; William Lee had. Her sweet angel had lain with her; William Lee never must. Each man had been a part of her education. Each man would experience a part of her, but never the whole person. Nobody would ever, ever, know the real Mary Grace again.

Two days later, William Lee appeared with Dacia Henry in tow. The girl wanted to be with this man, but was nervous and standoffish with the white girl she considered a rival. Dacia refused to look at Mary Grace.
“Yes, William Lee?” Mary Grace asked.

“Reckon you know Dacia Henry?”

“Yes.” Mary Grace took a deep breath, just as she’d seen William Lee do. They both needed courage. “Why have you brought her to me?”

“This is my helpmate.”

Dacia stared at him. “Say, what?!”

William Lee grabbed her arm. “Show a little respect. This is God’s own precious lamb I brought you to. You must worship her.”

Dacia struggled. “You crazy?! That hurts my arm.”

William Lee, who hadn’t even wanted to bring her here, but knew he must, shoved her to the ground. “Shut up, fool!”

Dacia huddled at his feet and stared up at him in fear.

Mary Grace stepped forward. “Don’t frighten her, William Lee.”

William Lee still glared at Dacia. “Kiss the hem of her dress, fool! Don’t touch her flesh! You ain’t worthy!”

Trembling, Dacia complied, then bent her shoulders to weep. Mary Grace was getting tired of people bowing to her in supplication, but she supposed she’d better get used to the show of respect. William Lee as her lieutenant was going to make sure that she got that respect.

“Dacia, don’t be afraid. Dacia, listen to me. Look at me, child. I won’t hurt you.”

William Lee grabbed a handful of Dacia’s hair and yanked back her head. “You listen when God’s own sweet lamb talk to you, bitch!”

Dacia screamed.

“And hush, like I told you!”

Dacia hushed as she did as she was told. Tears muddied her cheeks as she stared, open mouthed, up at God’s own sweet lamb.

Mary Grace tried to give her a look of compassion, as any instrument of God would. “You like William Lee, don’t you. Dacia?”

“I, I guess.”

“He has chosen you to be his helpmate. Is that all right with you?”

The girl squeezed her eyes shut and two big tears rolled down her face. “I, I just wanted to have a few dates with him. Get friendly a little, like I’ve done with several guys already. I just like to fool around a little. You know?”

“This is more serious than a few dates, Dacia. William Lee is going to be my lieutenant, and his wife must help, too.”
“His wife?!”

“Are you willing?”

The girl cast puzzled, frightened eyes upward at William Lee. “I, I guess so.” It was the strangest proposal she’d ever heard of. She wondered if she really had any say in the matter, but was too dazed to protest.

“Then I must prepare you. You are soiled and must come to William Lee pure. Are you willing? Good,” she said to the girl’s slow nod. “Sit up straight and pull back your arms. William Lee, hold them tight.”

Dacia’s eyes got big as she knelt with no means of escape. What was this crazy white girl going to do to her?

Mary Grace bent and touched the girl’s left nipple with her index finger. The girl screamed as electricity shot through her and tried to break William Lee’s hold. When she finally quieted, her head was bent and she shuddered in shock. Tears and snot and slobbers dripped off her chin.

“Hold your head back,” Mary Grace instructed. When Dacia didn’t comply, Mary Grace’s voice hardened. “Pull your head back, or I’ll do it for you.”

The girl opened her eyes in fear and complied. She knew what was coming.

Mary Grace touched Dacia’s right nipple.

Dacia screamed and fought against the hands holding her up.

“Release her, William Lee.”

The girl crumpled to the ground and trembled in convulsions.

“I have burned the Devil out of her, William Lee.” She hoped she hadn’t also burned the nipples right off the girl’s breasts, too. “Take her and marry her. Live with her, but do not touch her for fifteen days. After that, she will be yours for life.” By that time the nipples should be fairly well healed, but still sensitive to the touch. She hoped the girl would learn to love William Lee’s touch and thereby welcome him to her bed.

William Lee pulled his dazed fiancee to her feet and led her away. The girl was shaking and quietly sobbing. Her free hand trembled as it fluttered around her stinging breasts. She wanted to touch them and bring them comfort, but knew that contact would make them sorer yet.

Mary Grace noticed a damp place on the back of the girl’s dress as the two walked away. Dacia was probably lucky that she hadn’t soiled herself. She was going to have to learn better control over her bodily functions than that. Dacia was going to be the wife of Mary Grace’s lieutenant. That wouldn’t be an easy life, not with her husband in love with some other woman.

Within the week the young couple were married and retreated to a shack of their own. William Lee obeyed the letter of Mary Grace’s law, even though Dacia wore skimpy nightgowns and tore at his clothes. After two weeks William Lee locked their front door, and the newlyweds weren’t seen for awhile. They emerged in smiles. Mary Grace had performed another miracle, although she secretly figured that Mother Nature had more to do with their happiness than she herself did.

But miracles are short lasting, especially when it’s only sexual attraction. Mary Grace sought a strong and calm lieutenant because he had a good home life where he would take his wife to bed often.
Dacia tried, even though she knew her husband was fascinated with the ethereal white girl.

Dacia thought she knew what might turn William Lee’s head to her again. She wanted another dose of the electricity given to her by Mary Grace. The first dose had built steadily in her body until her consummation with William Lee, then had dissipated over the next few weeks. The ‘spark,’ as it were, had gone out of their relationship, much the same way as stale air slowly fizzles out of a poorly tied balloon. The marriage knot hadn’t been tied all that strongly between them, and another divorce might be looming all too quickly in what, the whites were heard to mutter, was known as ‘the quarter.’

Mary Grace thought that more than sexual attraction would have taken over their relationship. She had used the electricity simply to jump start it, so to speak. Pity was, sexual attraction was all there was between William Lee and Dacia. Love and caring had grown between. Dacia didn’t know that, though. She thought another treatment would help her.

But the black girl couldn’t directly ask a favor from the person she both feared and envied, so she strived to receive it indirectly by a seemingly casual contact. Mary Grace was puzzled the first time she felt the black girl’s breast brush past her arm, but a second encounter a week later was no accident. She confronted Dacia, learned the truth, and said Dacia should be woman enough to solve her own problem with her man. If Mary Grace had to save her power by not using it to satisfy herself with men, then Dacia shouldn’t be allowed to sap it, either. Mary Grace figured she wasn’t in this predicament simply to be a sex therapist for other women.

Mary Grace walked away, and negotiations were at a standstill. But that didn’t stop Dacia from trying to get ‘recharged’ by the white anomaly in their midst.

At this point, Mammy Cordelia was treated to a rare tabloid. Dacia was always trying to rub herself up against Mary Grace. Mammy shook her head. The girls had never seemed to be that type before. And it looked like Dacia should have enough of that sort of action to handle at home.

Then one day, Mary Grace apparently had had enough of the whining Dacia constantly being underfoot. Mammy Cordelia saw a frustrated Mary Grace pass her hand over Dacia’s breast. The hand barely touched, but Dacia’s head rocked back in ecstasy. Dacia went away happy, and Mary Grace sighed in relief.

Over the following years, Mammy Cordelia saw the strange ritual repeated occasionally as though it was some sort of Christmas present exchanged between the girls. Mammy Cordelia shook her head and remained silent. Hard to tell with the younger generation. It looked to Mammy Cordelia that Dacia and the white girl weren’t friends. Then what was the mysterious touching between them?

Mary Grace’s appearances at camp meetings continued. She gave hell and damnation speeches and never knew where the words came from. People came forward for cures. Some, she turned away. She could see a blackness around them and knew that nothing could help them. Either their bodies or souls were beyond help. Touching them would simply sap her energies.

Her fame spread throughout the Deep South, mostly by word of mouth by simple country folk. She and William Lee and Dacia set up a tent show on the back of a pickup truck and ministered to the folks that streamed to her. Some pointed fingers and screamed ‘charlatan,’ but that didn’t stop the crowds from forming wherever her pickup stopped. From her opening line of “Suffer my little children to come unto me” to the jolting healing, people watched her with hopeful eyes. She gave them what they wanted. She was more their slave than they were hers. What harm could a little hope do in their bleak lives?

Once, a suspicious man was overcome with joy when he saw his ailing child rise up from the
wheelchair that'd confined him for over a year. “Hail Mary, full of Grace!” the man had yelled in rapture, nearly causing Mary Grace to burst out laughing. She recalled the story her Granny often told when Great-Grandma had been expecting Granny.

Men back then were ashamed of their wives’ pregnant conditions even though the husbands were responsible for the women being that way. But Great-Grandma Mary was determined to go to a revival one Sunday shortly before Granny Gracie was due.

The only trouble was, Mary was huge in her pregnancy. She looked like she was expecting twins, or more. And Great Grandpa George was sensitive about the matter. Damn woman should stay at home and not embarrass him!

At the revival, a man got caught up in the proceedings and began to yell his faith. He’d been raised Catholic, had drifted away from the church, but its memorized teachings returned to his lips so that he would express his fervor in those old, memorized passages.

“Hail Mary, full of Grace!” he yelled at one particular moving segment of the service.

That was too much for Great-Grandpa George. Grace was the named picked if the coming baby would be a girl. So Great-Grandpa, not knowing a Catholic prayer from a cider press (as Granny always told the story), struck the man to the ground and dragged Great-Grandma home. Only later could a laughing Great-Grandma explain to him. But Great-Grandpa was still ruffled, saying nobody was going to insult his wife in that way.

Mary Grace continued the healing and the preaching, and her fame spread. She took the name Divine Light for she knew that that was the source of her power. Fifty years down the road, the electricity in her veins might kill her. But that was somewhere in a dim future. Now she was the instrument of God’s will. The people believed, even though she knew they believed in her power incorrectly. But to try to explain to them would lose their faith in her. There should always be some mystery about her. She had to protect the unapproachable core in herself.

And she was doing some good. For people do need hope. They can’t live without it.

Months after he left Arkansas, former sheriff Jeb Stuart Fossey refolded the OMAHA WORLD-HERALD newspaper, laid it on the cafe counter, and sipped the coffee that had cooled too much. He didn’t even notice its iciness. His mind was elsewhere, in a warmer climate where clouds didn’t threaten snow so early in the fall as they did up North here. He was back in the land of his roots, the Deep South of America.

Jeb had been reading about a young evangelist who was really drawing the crowds into nightly tent meetings all across the Texas prairie. She could preach hellfire and damnation, heal people with the touch of her hand, and mesmerize everyone who came within line of her vision. He didn’t much believe in faith healers because they duped desperate people. Jeb could’ve dismissed the story with a moment’s casual interest except for the accompanying picture. The girl was a ringer for Amanda, the girl who had broken up his happy little home in his former life. Perhaps Jeb was seeing what he wanted to see, but he couldn’t blame his imagination for the earrings she wore. They were lady bugs.

Miss Amanda of the Magic Mouth had worn lady bugs earrings. Their images were burned into his retinas. That’s what he had been staring at while she had swallowed his swollen member clear up to his hairy balls. He was certain she could have taken more of him if it hadn’t been for his damn groin.

Jeb smiled. What a testimonial he could give for this healer! He doubted if she saved others the way
she’d saved him. On the other hand, he should be angry with her, if it really was her. Whether it was Amanda or not, mattered little now. Seeking her out and getting revenge wouldn’t help. And he really couldn’t blame her. She had merely been a catalyst for something that must’ve been brewing for years. He had just THOUGHT he was happy and contented before he had met her.

Jeb wondered how many other marriages that seemed so perfect were actually held together by delicate threads. Perhaps what still hurt Jeb the worst was not the breakup of a marriage, but the loss of his dearest friend, his ex-wife Rachel.

Jeb knew little about Rachel’s whereabouts. Occasionally, he heard that she’d been seen by hometown travelers up in Washington State. But then he’d lost track of her when he left town himself. His only real connection with his old life was through their daughter Noreen.

The surprise was that Noreen was making her marriage work. She, Curt, and Clara were living well up in Alaska, and there were hints in her letters that a new baby was on its way. Perhaps Noreen had finally grown up. It was good she had. Now she was having to parent her parents.

Jeb wished that Noreen would mention her mother, but she never did. Perhaps it was for the best.

Jeb finished his coffee and pushed aside his breakfast plate.

“Need some more coffee, Jeb?”

“No, thanks, Nancy. Gotta get over to the gas station now. We’ll have lots of business with the Christmas travelers again today.”

“Better take it easy until you get used to cold weather.”

Jeb was curious. He liked the young widow who had a couple of teenagers at home. Talking to her was a high point of his day. “How did you know I’m not used to winter weather?”

A touch of red flashed across her pale cheeks making her almost pretty. “That accent. Nebraskans don’t talk that way. I, ah, I think it’s kind of pretty. My daughter would love hearing it.” She continued on in a rush, as if she’d lose her nerve if she paused for breath. “In fact, you could come over to supper some evening and meet her. My son, too. He’s into football. You two could talk about that.”

“Football’s about over for the season.”

“Basketball, then,” she said in a rush and blushed.

A gentle grin tugged at Jeb’s mouth. He was being asked for a date. It was modern times and a whole new set of social standards were offered to people. Trouble was, most of these same people had been raised by what was now considered to be old-fashioned morality. Nancy was asking a friend to dinner, not a man. But still, Jeb could see how uncomfortable she was by the reversal of roles.

“I think that would be a fine idea, Nancy. In fact, I think I’d enjoy that very much.”

“How about next Tuesday evening then? We generally have meat loaf and peach cobbler on Tuesday. I fix a big pan of oven-creamed potatoes to go with it. I could even cook up some greens for you, seeing as how you’re a Southern boy and all,” she said shyly.

“Sounds good.” He nearly added that it was a date, but feared she’d blush to her toes. “Let me know what time.”
Her eyes shone with happiness. “I will.” She grabbed his plate and cup and hustled them into the kitchen.

Jeb slid off the stool and ambled outside. He crawled into his pickup, but didn’t start it. This chilly day would be perfect for hunting. He understood they did a lot of that in Nebraska.

Sometimes, he missed his hunting dog Goldie the most. Or pheasant hunting with his brother-in-law who was married to his kid sister. Or visiting Rachel’s brother on the farm where Rachel had been raised. Or riding patrol around the small town where he’d grown up. Or keeping track of the people he’d known since childhood.

But all of that was gone. The two dogs had been given away. The old cat, sensing a disruption to her tranquil life, had died. His sister and brother-in-law had moved to Florida. And Jeb felt uneasy visiting Rachel’s brother on the farm.

Jeb missed the familiarity of those old companionships. Sometimes, he’d get so melancholy, he could understand why people took up drinking. Or killing, either himself or someone else. But he figured Life had some good living still in store for him, and he wanted to live it unfettered. That was one reason he had no interest in killing Amanda, although she probably needed it. Someone, somewhere, would probably do the job for him. Or, she’d just grow old in her own private hell. That was probably the worst punishment of all. Besides, she probably had some devils gnawing at her guts, too. He hoped so. But he was through letting her hurt him.

Several months had passed since he’d located in this small Nebraska town near I-80. There was a certain wistful security in being close to so much movement and not having to travel with it. He could observe it, but he didn’t need to participate. Maybe that was just a sign that he was settling in to his middle years.

Jeb had a pickup truck and a two-room apartment in a house just off Main Street. He was contented and thought he’d never need anything else. Now, suddenly, he was being offered more by Nancy.

He wondered idly if Nancy would go down on him if he asked. No, he supposed that experience would be his only once. He breathed deeply. At least it had been his. He thanked Amanda for the experience, but he didn’t respect her for it. Despite her seeming innocence, she’d been nothing but a whore, after all. And it looked like she still was. She was just screwing a different bunch of people, in a different way. She’d extended her horizons, and he couldn’t blame her for that. If she had a product that was selling, she might as well hang out her shingle. It was still a free country, and she could move ahead as fast as she could move her mouth, either by talking or in, ah, other ways. He grinned. Heaven, and he, knew she was damn good at both.

Jeb supposed life wasn’t meant to stay static. Amanda had moved on, why shouldn’t he? Constant change was required. But did he want to develop a relationship with Nancy and her family? It would be so easy, and nice, to be included in a family circle again.

Or he could start his pickup and just keep driving in whatever direction the pickup chose. He’d left his life behind once. The second time would be easier. Or would it?

Jeb knew he was at a crossroads. Whatever he decided today could determine the rest of his life. Wouldn’t Noreen be surprised to see her daddy show up in Alaska?

He watched the vehicles whiz by on I-80. It was Christmas and people were headed home. No matter where they went, those people finally tired of the road. Everyone needed roots.

So did Jeb.
Jeb crawled out of his pickup and walked to the gas station. He’d be a couple of minutes early, but his hands would be welcomed in the Christmas rush. People always are welcomed when they get home. He had to remember to learn more about sports. Something told him that he would soon be needing a whole lot more knowledge in that area.

Years later, Mary Grace was living in a small house in Natchez. The neighbors in the run-down section were mostly black and left the strange acting white woman alone. She always wore white clothes and her faded blonde hair stood straight out in stormy weather. Word had it that she communed with spirits in the lightening.

Mary Grace lived frugally from the wise investments of the proceeds from her years of evangelism. She was never defrauded in her career, simply because she never made flamboyant claims. The people who flocked to her were given a good show, and hope, and went away happy. She always backed down to any authorities who challenged her and left their protests with no grounds to support them. And still the people came. True, only a few towards last, but they still came. But they were country folk like Mary Grace, and they knew that secrets existed in nature that the scientists don’t recognize. That was all right, the country folk said with a smile. Let those city folk be ignorant, if they want. They knew different, and that was all that was important to them.

It had been an empty life for Mary Grace, but not lonely. Mammy Cordelia and her sons had become her family. She never tried to find her kin. There just wouldn’t be anything to say to them. They’d expect the simple, naive girl they’d known in Ohio, but they’d find a cunning woman whose eyes and smile reflected knowledge of the world. Their Mary Grace was long dead, so this Mary Grace let her stay that way.

Mammy Cordelia was long dead, too, gone to sing with the heavenly choir. But she came to Mary Grace in dreams, and together they walked again to camp meetings near the river. And Mary Grace would awaken with such a longing that soon she began to wish that she wouldn’t awaken from the dreams.

Lucius was gone, too, shot for petting some farmer’s chickens. The man shot first and later learned that Lucius was a harmless, simple-minded animal lover. The farmer thought Lucius was a prowling fox that’d been spooking his hens. Lucius would’ve liked being mistaken for a fox. He didn’t disturb Mary Grace’s sleep the way Mammy Cordelia did. Mary Grace figured Lucius and the three hens also slaughtered with the farmer’s shotgun blast were peacefully traveling through eternity together.

William Lee and Dacia lived nearby in Natchez. Even though the evangelism was over, William Lee still followed Mary Grace. He held a watchman’s job at a factory and kept track of her accounts as he had for years. He never cheated her and stayed half in love, half in awe of her as he had always done.

Dacia feared Mary Grace, and an inner core of her never melted so she could have babies. Even repeated treatments of nipple shocks couldn’t make her womb blossom. Once William Lee had made her sit in a tub of water while Mary Grace grasped both her breasts. Sparks flew and Dacia stiffened, then went into convulsions. Her black hair fell out and grew back white. She developed a permanent crick in her neck and a violent facial tic that twisted her mouth to the side whenever Mary Grace came near her. But still she did not conceive. Mary Grace feared she had destroyed Dacia’s womb. From then on, she was careful not to touch Dacia for fear of exploding her; or more realistically, of having Dacia die of fright.
Mammy Cordelia’s only grandchild was a teenage girl fathered by Lucius quite accidentally after a camp meeting. His partner had lured him after being dared by friends and then discovered she’d aroused more than she could handle. Her irate father forced the child onto Mammy Cordelia to raise. The child’s mother wanted to go to nurse’s training and ‘didn’t need no moment’s trifling tying her down.’ So, eventually, William Lee and Dacia had inherited the girl. The way the teenager rolled her eyes and giggled, though, it wouldn’t be long before she started shelling out babies, too. And the cycle would start all over again. The best don’t always reproduce, despite Mother Nature’s excellent planning.

Mary Grace sat rocking in the living room of her little house one day. Her blonde hair was shot with white even though she wasn’t very old. But she knew her time on Earth was nearly ended. Mammy Cordelia was getting awfully insistent lately. Mary Grace’s only question was: When? When, Mammy, when? But Mammy Cordelia’s answer was more hymn singing. And that can get aggravating when a person really wants to know something.

So often now, Mary Grace thought about the pretty lady she’d seen killed so many years ago in St. Louis. That’d been the start of it. That was why she’d never found Papa. What a strange odyssey she’d journeyed from there until the thunderbolt, the ‘finger of God,’ had found her in Texas. Her life had been unreal, almost a fable since then. Was she punished for not helping the pretty lady? No, she could hardly believe that. Circumstances had merely sucked her up and funneled her down into her destiny.

The pretty lady had been married to a movie star, also long dead now. Funny how Mary Grace had once read movie magazines and dreamed about meeting actors and actresses, then had walked with a celebrity and never realized it until later. And after Mary Grace’s own fame grew, she realized how unimportant it really was. But no one knew this fact until Fame lit Life’s path.

In many ways the fable of her life from St. Louis to Texas read like a farce, even a mockery of coincidence. The actress Pearl White had become famous for making silent movie serials about perils faced by the heroine Pauline and conquered, often in incredible ways. So it had seemed with Mary Grace’s perils. There always seemed to be an escape for her, no matter how incredible. But it had often cost the lives of other people.

She was thinking thoughts like this when William Lee tore into the house. The old anger blazed from his eyes, but she was used to his moods.

“Come in, William Lee, and sit a spell. Hot out, ain’t it? Want some lemonade?”

“Don’t want no damned lemonade, woman!”

“Whatever,” she murmured. “Sit a spell then and visit.”

He stormed to the cold fireplace and slapped the mantel. “Can’t sit! Can’t visit! I’m mad!”

“What’s the trouble, William Lee?” She rocked and fanned herself because the day was indeed hot. Insects buzzed at the open window. Or was that Mammy Cordelia singing softly? Mary Grace opened her eyes and studied his angry face. “Too hot to be all worked up today, William Lee. What’s the trouble, anyway?”

He paced, his eyes rolling wildly. “I done told you! Weren’t you listening?!”

“Tell me again, William Lee. My mind drifts sometimes, darlin.?”
“That woman leaving me!”

“Dacia?”

He ignored the obvious. “She say I no good for her anymore. She say I never was, because, because-” He choked on the words. “She’s jealous! Because I’m thinking of you all the time I’m trying, and not her. She say she scared of you, too. That’s why she can’t conceive!”

“Scared of me?” Mary Grace pulled herself out of her rocker and frowned. “Maybe that’s why the treatments never worked. The patient has to trust his doctor. Do you trust me, William Lee?”

Mammy Cordelia was singing a hymn so loudly Mary Grace couldn’t hear his answer, but she saw his sweating face stare at her and his mouth say, ‘Yeah.’ She forgot she’d never been that good at reading lips. She should’ve ordered Mammy Cordelia to shut up and had William Lee repeat himself.

What he’d actually said was, ‘Huh?’ But Mary Grace didn’t know that.

She gave him a lazy half-smile. “I’ve just been treating the wrong patient.”

He frowned in confusion.

She stepped forward, gave him a lazy smile, and shoved her pointed finger into his groin.

William Lee yelped and landed butt-first on the floor. He stared up at her and grimaced in obvious pain.

“What the hell--!”

“Now you can service Dacia or any woman you want.” She arched an eyebrow in coyness. “Except me, of course.” She turned back to her rocker.

With a cry of frustration he could no longer hold in check, William Lee jumped to his feet and began to choke Mary Grace. Electricity crackled around them.

“Stop it, you fool! You’ll kill yourself!”

“Then we die together, bitch!”

She fought the hands as darkness flowed around her. And it was an empty darkness. Where was Mammy Cordelia? She’d quit singing.

Mary Grace wasn’t quite dead, but it wouldn’t be long now. Her neck was twisted and hurt terribly, so she had no desire to move or help herself. She just wanted her death to be over, but she knew it wasn’t. She knew the evil wasn’t over yet, either, and that she had partly caused it.

William Lee had her sprawled on the floor and was tearing at her clothing. Pieces of white material flew in the air and landed in odd places like thistledown would. His sobs of fear and lust and revenge were the only sounds in the small house as his rough hands traveled unchecked over her naked body. Sparks crackled along the trails that his hands took. Then he ripped Mary Grace’s thighs apart and plunged into her.

Where was Mammy Cordelia’s singing now? She could endure anything if the singing would only start again. She wanted something soothing to listen to, not those wrenching sobs that were tearing the heart out of the man who loomed over her.

Mary Grace had watched movies in which sharks attacked swimmers. The blunted thrusts of the
sharks and the stunned incomprehension of the victims had always made her think of rape. Why, she didn’t know. But that was all that the world consisted of now: blunted thrusts and stunned incomprehension. And as the universe exploded into a shower of electricity that turned back on itself into Mary Grace, she felt sorry for the real victim, the shark. Now that man shook with self-loathing as he realized the pillage he had caused in Mary Grace and the carnage he had caused to both of them.

And then Mammy Cordelia was singing again. Not a hymn this time, but a cradle lullaby and it was so soothing.

No, it wasn’t Mammy Cordelia; it was William Lee. And it wasn’t a lullaby. He was sobbing. And he was cradling Mary Grace in his arms. And she remembered why she felt sorry for the shark. He’d lost something, too.

“Why you make me do that for? All I ever wanted was to love you. All these years, I just wanted to love you.”

Why, indeed? She couldn’t answer at first for the soreness in her throat. But another question puzzled her. Why hadn’t he died from the electricity? And then she knew that after all these years, the electricity had turned on its host and tried to kill it. Like Spanish moss or mistletoe, it was a parasite. Wasn’t that the nature of most psychic gifts, anyway? Didn’t most special talents eventually prove to be more of a trial than a blessing? And didn’t some even destroy their hosts?

All she could now was to lie in his arms as a woman should and not harm him. He had brought her to full cycle and she was grateful. There were no words to make him understand that even though she was dying, she was happy.

“My beloved, thank you,” she murmured and slipped away to join Mammy Cordelia at the joyous camp meeting.

Thank him, for what? For killing her? For raping her? For destroying her strange power, the thing that’d made her different and intriguing because he couldn’t have her?

But she did not answer him. She could not answer that he had freed her. If she could have, he might’ve remained sane.

William Lee slapped her to make her talk. But, of course, she couldn’t. He thought she wouldn’t, so he slapped her again. Only this time it was harder.

Then harder.

Then harder, until it wasn’t his open hand anymore. This time, it was a fist.

Then harder, still.

And again…. And again…. And....

When the authorities arrived, William Lee was saturated with her blood. Her brain matter had spattered the walls. She didn’t have a face anymore, and William Lee’s knuckles were swollen from beating her corpse. There was even evidence that he had violated her, even in death.

Mary Grace lay in a twisted heap on the floor. What was left of her face was mercifully shoved into the carpeting. Not being able to look in her face, William Lee had flipped her over and sodomized
her. He squatted in a corner and stared at her body while he alternately cursed and cackled at her. Sweat poured down his black face and he had no comprehension of the policemen who tried to talk to him.

Crime-hardened cops turned away from the scene with queasy stomachs. What sickened them the most was the mutilation he’d caused to himself. His useless organ lay where he’d flung it on the floor near Mary Grace. It was more than her blood that carpeted the floor. A cut to the groin produces a lot of blood, especially if the wound isn’t attended to right away.

The mortally injured man would bleed to death before the approaching ambulance could get him to the hospital. That was fine with him.

William Lee couldn’t hear the questions from the officers because his Mammy’s singing was so loud in his ears. He hummed along with the gospel music, hoping his voice would be good enough for Heaven.
The young woman standing beside Jessie on the busy sidewalk lowered the receiver of the pay telephone and frowned at her. “I said, what was that noise?”

“I don’t know.” Jessie was unused to someone speaking directly to her in the city. She’d been so deep in thought that she’d nearly forgotten that she was in downtown St. Louis. “What did it sound like?”


A crowd was gathering at the curb and staring down. A woman screamed and people milled about. Someone shifted and revealed a woman clutching a street post and sobbing against it. But no one was looking at her.

“Someone’s been hit,” the stranger beside Jessie said. “Come on!”

A teenage girl barreled past the two at the phone booth. The girl’s eyes were glazed with shock.

“That girl—” Jessie started.

“Never mind her! Help me!”

They pushed through the crowd and saw the victim sprawled on the pavement in a blanket of typewritten papers.

“Help the other one, the one on the post,” the woman directed to Jessie, then she squatted beside the accident victim.

Jessie turned to the woman clutching the street post. A flash bulb exploded.

Jessie pushed past the photographer. “Leave her alone. Get a little class. There’s been an accident here.”

“Go screw yourself, lady,” the photographer yelled back. “This is news.”

Jessie pried the woman off the street post. “Come over here, honey, and sit down.” She pulled the woman to the sidewalk and put her arm around her.

“The car! It h-hit her! It almost h-hit me!”

“I know.” Jessie gathered the larger woman against her chest. “It’s okay, honey. You’re safe now.”

Jessie looked at the accident victim. The woman from the pay phone was leaning over her as is she was listening to something. Then she settled back on her heels.

“She’s gone.”

A man stepped forward, handed a purse to the woman squatted on the pavement, and said something.

“It’s Sean’s wife!” Then: “The actor, Sean Murphy. Miles’ friend.” Then: “HARRINGTON-PRICE, you culturally deprived idiots! Don’t you ever watch television?! I saw this woman on an
awards show not over a month ago! She was with her husband when he received the Life
Achievement Award. And now she’s dead!”

The Samaritan herself was becoming hysterical and needed help, but Jessie couldn’t leave the
sobbing woman clinging to her. Besides, the approaching sirens would be on the scene at any
moment. Help for all of them was coming.

Someone in white pried the sobbing woman out of Jessie’s arms and led her to the ambulance. Jessie
helped the squatting woman to her feet.

“We might as well ride in the ambulance,” Jessie told her. “The police will want to talk to us,
anyway. We three crossed the street with the victim. We might be able to help the police. I know I’d
sure like to talk to that crazy bastard and find out why he went barreling through here like a bat out
of hell.”

Now that the ambulance people had taken charge of the scene, the Samaritan was willing to be
directed by someone else. She looked at Jessie with slightly glazed eyes and allowed herself to be led
away.

They sat in the racing ambulance and watched as a paramedic wrapped a blanket around the sobbing
woman.

“She’s in shock,” Jessie said almost conversationally to the woman from the phone booth. “I’m
Jessie. Who are you?”

“Bambi. No. Barbara. Sometimes I’m called Bambi. It’s a, a, a nickname.” She stared
the ceiling of the ambulance, and her mouth dropped open. “Jesus Christ! I’m in the middle of a
nightmare here! This can’t be real!”

Jessie patted her hand. “It’ll be all right, Barbara.”

Barbara’s eyes were wild with fear. “It could’ve been one of us! You were right! We did cross the
street with her. I remember now. She was having trouble walking. Her high heels kept slipping on
the slick street.” She stared at Jessie. “But why her? Why not one of us?”

“It’s like a game of Russian roulette. The loaded chamber could’ve stopped anywhere, at any one of
us.”

Barbara’s eyes filled with tears.

“Tears are good, honey. It means we’re accepting.”

Barbara shivered and Jessie put her arm around her.

“Don’t worry, honey. We’ll stick together. Did you know her? It sounded like you did. You were
the first to identify her.”

Barbara put her head back and sighed. “No, I never met her or Sean Murphy.” She gave Jessie a
twisted smile. “But I talked to him on the phone once. Well, talk isn’t really the word. I was struck
dumb when I realized who was on the other end. I’m afraid I babbled at him.”

“Who wouldn’t?” Jessie gave her a smile of interest. “How did you ever manage to get Sean Murphy
to call you?”

“I didn’t. I was at the home of Miles Paxton Hughes and answered the phone and it was Sean
Murphy."

“You know Miles Paxton Hughes?!”

“We spent a weekend together in his California beach home.”

Jessie arched an eyebrow. “That must’ve been fun.” Jessie sighed deeply. “Oh, what I’d give to spend two days, and nights, with a dreamboat like Miles Paxton Hughes. I’d have to sleep for a week to catch up on my rest afterwards, but it’d be worth it.”

“It was purely platonic.”

“Yeah, yeah. Sure, it was.”

“Really. All he was interested in was friendship.”

“Is he gay?!”

“Far from it. He has a wife and son back East.”

Jessie started to pull her arm away. “Then, are you gay?”

Barbara smiled. “Far from it. That’s part of the trouble. There’s too many guys. And I’m not with any of them right now.”

“I should’ve known. Man trouble. Is there any other kind?”

Barbara glanced at Jessie. “You, too?”

Jessie sighed. “Sam’s asked me to marry him, but I don’t know if marriage is what I want. You?”

“I was on my way to California to see Miles when I got cold feet and stopped in St. Louis to think.”

“It must be that kind of a town. I’m here to think, too. Wonder why we both picked this place?”

“Because it’s in the center of the country? Like it’s the center of everything?”

Jessie shrugged. “Sounds as good as any reason.” She glanced across the aisle. “Our fellow traveler seems better.”

“Or maybe just worn out. She couldn’t stay hysterical forever.”

The sobbing woman had quieted to a stony silence and was admitted to the hospital for observation. Jessie and Barbara followed her upstairs and waited in the lounge for the police. Their wait wasn’t long.

A burly man with a wet balmaccan coat flapping around his legs charged into the waiting room. “I’m Sergeant Berkowski. Are you the witnesses from the hit-and-run fatality?”

Jessie set aside the Styrofoam cup holding steaming hot coffee. “Yes. We didn’t see that much, but we did cross the street with the victim.”

“Do you remember the other people you were with?”

“Not really,” Jessie answered. “I was thinking about my own problems.”

“And you, Miss Crider? Do you remember anyone?” Berkowski asked.
“No.” Barbara shook her head slowly. “Wait. There was a teenage girl.”

“That’s right!” Jessie agreed. “Wasn’t she the one who ran passed us looking scared? Remember? She didn’t even seem to know we were there.”

Berkowski looked interested. “Had she been injured?”

“I don’t think so. Just shocked.”

“What did she look like?”

Jessie shrugged. “Just a kid.”

“Miss Carey said the girl was wearing lady bug earrings. Do you remember that?”

Jessie and Barbara glanced at each other and shook their heads.

“I don’t even know if she crossed the street with us,” Barbara answered. “I just remember her a moment after I heard the noise of the impact.”

“That’s right,” Jessie agreed.

Berkowski shut his notepad. “Not much to go on, but we’ll need your formal statements, ladies. You can come down later to headquarters and do that. The press will probably want your names for the newspaper story, too.”

Barbara looked wild.

“Look,” he said softly. “I can talk to them for you. The victim was married to a famous person. The newshounds will be after all the facts they can get. They’re like sharks smelling blood. They go into a frenzy. They won’t care what they put you two through just so they can get a story.”

Jessie patted Barbara’s hand. “Thank you, Sergeant. We’re really not up to meeting any reporters.”

The burly man leaned forward in the plastic chair that was too small for him. “Is there anyone you want me to notify for either of you?”

Jessie felt Barbara stiffen. Jessie thought of her own mother. What could Billie possibly do for her? Then she thought of Sam and gave Berkowski his name.

Berkowski looked at Barbara. “How about you, Miss?”

“No, no one,” Barbara said softly. There was no point to worry Aunt Rose back in Pennsylvania. She ached to be with Miles, but his presence seemed completely out of reach to her now. A door had slammed between them again, and she wanted to run back to Pennsylvania and hide. She should’ve never attempted a trip West to find him.

“Miss? Are you sure?”

Barbara rubbed one hand over the other. “I was on my way to California to, ah, to meet someone, but now I’m not sure if it’s wise that I continue. He doesn’t know I was coming to him, so you can see how impractical it would be to notify him, don’t you?” Her smile held no mirth. She turned her head and stared at a lamp in the corner.

Berkowski frowned. “Is she going to be all right?” he said to Jessie.
“I’ll take care of her, Sergeant. I’m staying with friends and I’ll take her home with me tonight. We’ll go down to the station tomorrow and give our statements.”

“Good enough.” Berkowski heaved himself to his feet. “I’ll see you then. Sure is a shame about the victim. She had everything. And now she doesn’t have what counts the most. Life.” He walked away, shaking his head.

Jessie patted Barbara’s hand and smiled. “Come on, honey. Let’s get your luggage and get to my friends’ house. Don’t worry. This will soon be over.”

Barbara meekly followed Jessie down the hall.

The next day the two women gave their statements to Sergeant Berkowski. He thanked them and they rose to leave.

“Oh, by the way, Miss Horne. Your friend Sam Benedict wants you to return his call. There’s public phones at the front door that you can use.”

“Thank you, Sergeant. Well,” Jessie said brightly to Barbara. “I guess this is it. You probably don’t want to stick around while I call Sam.”

Barbara smiled. “No. The conversation will probably get all mushy.”

Jessie had the grace to blush. “It might. He’s probably frantic with worry by now. I left him kind of high and dry several days ago. And then he gets a call from the St. Louis police department about me. That probably really upset him.”

“At least he remembers you. I expect Miles forgot all about me a long time ago. Hunting him up now was a foolish whim of mine. He would’ve thought I was crazy.”

“You never know what men are thinking, honey. And they say we’re the hard ones to figure out.” She studied Barbara who was trying not to burst into tears. “So, you’re not going out to him?”

“No,” Barbara whispered. She smiled through her tears. “So, you’re going home to Sam, right?”

“I’m going home. I still haven’t made a decision about Sam. I’m just so damned happy about being alive that I can’t think of too much else. But Sam’s a friend as well as a guy I might marry. I owe my friend a phone call to tell him that I’m going to be okay.”

“And I think you are, Jessie. I know I owe you my debt of gratitude.” She hugged Jessie. “Now, I have to be leaving.”

“You could always wait until I finish my call. That actor fellah might show up to talk to us. Sergeant Berkowski said that Sean Murphy was already in town. Murphy might want to meet people who had been with his wife when she had died.”

And Miles Paxton Hughes might’ve accompanied Sean to St. Louis, Barbara thought. If Miles came face to face with Barbara, he might recognize her and she didn’t want that. She was afraid Miles wouldn’t want her. Her bravery dissolved completely.

“You talk to Mr. Murphy, Jessie,” Barbara whispered. “I couldn’t face the man. I didn’t help his wife very much.”
Jessie frowned. “You did all you could. It was nobody’s fault, except that crazy Mr. Miller’s.”

“It’s something I just can’t do. I have to go. Goodbye, Jessie.” She kissed Jessie’s cheek and fled down the hall.

“But--” She held her hand out, but Barbara didn’t stop. After a moment, Jessie walked toward the public telephones.

Once again, Jessie’s plane was touching down in Jackson, Tennessee, and once again someone was waiting for her. But this time it was Sam Benedict who met it.

His face looked stricken, and emotion prevented him from talking. He simply pulled his arms around her and cradled her against him. His body trembled with the fears and concerns that he could finally release.

“Jessie. Oh, God, Jessie. I nearly lost you.” His voice sounded muffled against her hair.

She tried to pat his chest to reassure him. “I’ll be okay, Sam.”

He pushed her to arms’ length. “Are you really all right, honey?”

“Numb. Just numb, Sam. And tired. I didn’t know how tired I was until I got back here.”

He draped his arm around her shoulders to guide her. “I’ll get you back to Clinton, and you can rest. Don’t worry about answering questions. I doubt if anyone except me knows what happened to you.”

He was wrong about that, of course. The story of Melana Clerke-Jones’ death had swept the country. So had the photograph of Priscilla Carey hugging the street post. The names of the other witnesses were in the story, too.

Sam left Jessie to herself for the drive back to Clinton. She stared out the window and wondered what she’d say to people clamoring for details of the accident. All she wanted was peace and quiet, but she knew she’d be the center of attention when she got back home.

Little did she know that she was wrong about that, too.

Billie didn’t even notice Jessie’s bedraggled condition. And for once, Jessie’s mother seemed fairly animated.

“I suppose Sam told you that the killer’s been caught.”

It didn’t make any sense. Melana Clerke-Jones’ killer died a few minutes after she had. Whatever was Billie babbling about?

“Don’t look like a complete dolt! the whole town’s talking about it.”

Oh, Lord. The questions--

“At least Shelly’s off the hook. I never thought she’d done it, but I wouldn’t have blamed her if she had.”

“W-what are you talking about?!”
“Brian’s murder, for Christ’s sake! Where have you been?! On another planet?!”

“Brian’s murder?” Oh. Oh, yeah. “Who did it?”

Billie breathed heavily and her dark eyes flashed. “I have half a notion not to tell you. You’re doing a damn good imitation of a doorknob, did you know that? You must take that after your father. My side of the family has always been interested in current events, while his… Well, let me tell you, missy. Your father sure does like his bedroom time.” She sniffed with disdain. “That’s probably another way you take after him.”

Jessie sighed. “Please, Mama. No lectures, huh? And no innuendoes, okay? I’ve had a lot on my mind. Who did the killing? Or do I have to wait until the story comes out in TRUE CRIME magazine?”

Billie marched around her recliner and deliberately straightened a doily on the television. She was savoring her knowledge. Jessie generally didn’t pay that much attention to her, and Billie was getting her revenge.

Billie looked back smugly at Jessie. “Ed Barton.”

“Ed Barton?! Former Mayor of Clinton, Ed Barton?! Honored World War II vet, Ed Barton?! Older than the hills, Ed Barton?! Why would that old man kill Brian?”

“You’re forgetting. Ed was Scout Master when Brian earned his Eagle Scout. Ed was very proud of Brian and thought he was ‘the ideal of what American youth should be,’ to be quote Ed. He also taught Brian to shoot. Ed was a crack shot himself and loved to go hunting with Brian. But he didn’t like what Brian had become with his recent shenanigans and underhanded deals, so he killed him.”

Jessie remembered the bitter, old man showing his anger to Jessie that day on the street. Ed had been disappointed. Brian had been like a son to him. He’d taught Brian his own ideals, and Brian had discarded them. So Ed had discarded Brian.

“Course it won’t do the Court much good to try Ed,” Billie continued. “Seems he’s got terminal cancer, and he’s not doing too well. His hate was what was keeping him going, so—” Billie shrugged. “—now that’s gone. What’s he got to live for?” She frowned. “I’m surprised that Sam hadn’t told you that the murder had been solved.”

Jessie was wondering the same thing and intended to ask Sam about it.

“I knew you were tired, Jess,” Sam explained over the telephone. “I knew any kind of talking could wait. Even talk about us.”

“Sam—”

“I won’t pressure you, Jess.”

“I’m sorry if I hurt you by running off.”

“My timing wasn’t right. I guess I read you wrong. I thought you were needing a relationship.”

“I don’t know what I’m needing, Sam. And I don’t want you to get hurt any worse by me.”

“Maybe we just better forget I said anything.”
“I don’t want to lose your friendship, Sam.”

Sam didn’t answer at first. “You’ll always have that, Jess. Whatever else happens, we’ll always be friends.”

Later, after supper, Jessie settled in front of the portable TV in her mother’s trailer. Thank God that Billie had consented to go the movies with her cousin Margie! Now Jessie could watch the country-western music special in peace. But images of her own singing career kept interrupting her thoughts.

The Culpeppers had started as a singing group from Culpepper County in Virginia. Three of the original members had even been relatives. But after thirty years, members had dropped out for marriage and other careers. New people were added to replace them and to add freshness to the group. The original concept of blue grass cloggers had gradually modernized into a sleek country crossover. The group strived to maintain their initial identity, but weren’t afraid to record modern songs. After all, they were in the business to sell records.

Because the group had a family image with a flexible structure of people coming and going, the group was not torn up with any one person’s loss. If Jessie chose not to return, the Culpeppers would heal much as a tree does when losing a small branch. The tree might sport a scar on the outside for the rest of its life, but the tree would go on living.

Much of the flavor of the group’s singing in the last ten years was attributed to Gaylon Marrick, a middle-aged songwriting balladeer from northern Missouri. Although he wasn’t a Southerner, he blended well with the group and had written some of its most memorable songs. The Culpeppers never had a record in the top ten, but they enjoyed steady employment and a loyal following. They were popular at county fairs and jamborees. Occasionally, they appeared on television shows, but they preferred live entertainment in front of a large crowd.

During a commercial of the show she was watching, Jessie caught herself humming one of Gaylon Marrick’s songs. He’d been a farm boy and tried never to forget his rough county beginnings. The song was I WAS BORN IN A TRUCK.

Daddy was a farmer and drove those big old trucks; That and me kept him from the war. Many years have passed since then and Daddy’s still a farmer, But trucking’s what’s my daddy’s living for.

Oftentimes on Monday morn when Mama did the washing, With baby-sitting chores my dad got stuck. He didn’t hesitate at all but took me out a’riding With him behind the wheel of his old truck.

From dusk till dawn he trucked the hogs; He knew each turn and twist of that old road. At St. Joe town he turned a buck, Then headed home to get another load.

Mama had no license then ’Cause Daddy couldn’t buy a shining car. But homeward bound when he got tired, she’d take the wheel; She’d always drive the truck at least that far.
Now that I am full grown, my tastes they haven’t changed much
From country cooking, living quiet, and church on Sunday morn.
And when I hear the tires of eighteen wheelers start to howling,
I’m might glad ‘twas in a truck I happened to be born,
‘Cause I was born in a truck!

The television special wasn’t that good, and Jessie flicked it off. She was caught up in her own music
and wanted to hear more. She snapped a tape in the player and settled back to listen. Gaylon’s voice
filled the room.

You call yourself a Christian
Who obeys the Golden Rule.
You make sure our little boy
Never misses Sunday school.
The preacher dines out at our house;
Church ladies eat your lunch.
How can a Christian not forgive,
‘Cause I only cheated once.

Cheating is a hurting game;
I knew that from the start.
But I just had to have forbidden love,
Or else I’d break my heart.
We sinned, I know, and some sad day,
We both may burn in hell.
But unless you change your attitude,
You’ll burn right there as well.

Jessie was missing the Culpeppers. They, more than her blood relatives, had become her family. If
she would awaken tomorrow morning in their midst, she’d feel happy again and would be content
never to leave them.

Then came the odd song on the tape; the song written by Gaylon after his wife had insisted on taking
a vacation in Hawaii. YOUR BEAUTIFUL ISLANDS wasn’t exactly a country song, but
audiences tolerated it because they knew Gaylon had written it.

I bid farewell to your beautiful islands
Set like pearls in a vast turquoise sea
And I wish I could claim these as my lands
‘Cause they’ve been like heaven to me.

Paradise couldn’t be half so lovely
As these islands I’m leaving today
For ‘Aloha’ they whisper they love me
And forever my heart longs to stay.

Hawaii, your name stirs emotion
Such perfection I never can keep
For my home lies far over the ocean
But I’ll journey here nights when I sleep.

Hawaii, your name paints a picture
With brush strokes of tropical isles.
I fall victim to all that allures me
In a land where the sun always smiles.

Paradise couldn’t be half so lovely
As these islands I’m leaving today
For ‘Aloha’ they whisper they love me
And forever my heart longs to stay.

The tape continued playing through several more songs, but Jessie didn’t hear the music. When the machine turned off with a snap, Jessie jumped and realized she hadn’t been listening. Her mind had been elsewhere.

“Forever my heart longs to stay,” Jessie whispered. After a few minutes, she called Chad in Nashville and talked to him about her future with the Culpeppers.

Far into the night, Jessie sat on the edge of her cramped bed in Billie’s trailer and thought about many things, including her great-grandmother. Lydia Conklin Medford had been a pioneer woman of true courage and became a source of pride and inspiration for her descendants. Lydia herself would’ve been the last to be impressed with her accomplishments; she merely did what had to be done at the moment. That’s why Jessie was thinking of Lydia and hoping she could be worthy of her ancestor.

Lydia Conklin had grown up on a farm in New York State as the daughter of practical, God-fearing people. She expected to marry some farmer and live out her days in familiar surroundings. And then the American Civil War swept through the land.

Lydia and her family were appalled by the war and swore to do their duty by God and country. Some of Lydia’s brothers joined the Northern army; Lydia became a battlefield nurse. But war conditions eventually took their toll on even Lydia’s iron constitution; and she was brought home, ill and drained, by her father.

Jessie often thought of that journey home for Lydia. There were times that she could so vividly imagine Lydia’s thoughts and feelings that she felt that she had walked with Lydia.

Jessie slowly restored her health on her parents’ farm with simple food and hard work, but she often thought of one of the battlefield doctors and wondered what had become of him. He’d been a hard, unfeeling, cold man, and she’d tried to reach him in friendship. But he had worked like an automated creation and refused to soften to her or their extreme surroundings with the cries of the wounded and dying all around them.

And then the war had ended, and all of her brothers came home, except one. The family grieved, but life went on with Benjamin. She thought often of the hard doctor who refused to let himself be human, for she could have loved him and made a good life with him.

And then one day he appeared at the farm, saying he had sought her far and wide. She had been an inspiration to him during the grueling war and had not realized it until she had left. He wanted to open a hospital with her as head of the nursing staff. She said she would only if he would marry her. Much to her surprise, he agreed; and they married a month later. Frederick Medford eventually proved to be a wonderful husband and father. They journeyed into the deep South to help restore a normal life to the very people they’d so recently fought against. The hospital they established was still in operation near Memphis, and their descendants were scattered across the United States.

Jessie wondered if she could make half as good a life as Lydia had.
Jessie went to see her cousin Shelly and found her saying goodbye to a man at her front door. From the way Shelly was smiling up at Dick Summers, she wouldn’t be a lonely widow very long. No wonder Brian had named Dick as correspondent when he had filed for divorce.

“Hello, you two.”

Shelly sprang away from Dick. “Oh! Jessie. I didn’t hear you drive up.”

Small wonder, Jessie thought.

“Dick was just leaving, so come on in. Dick, I’ll, ah, see you later.”

Soft looks and gentle smiles passed between them. They looked like a couple of high school sophomores deep in their first shy love affair. Self-conscious grins wreathed their faces that were pink from blushing.

“Dick is helping with my business problems,” Shelly explained as she led Jessie into the living room and motioned for Jessie to be seated. “There are so many details, and Dick has been more than generous with his time.”

“You don’t have to explain to me, Shelly. I’m glad you had someone waiting in the wings.”

Shelly blushed and shifted uncomfortably in her chair. “That’s probably what everybody thinks, Jessie, but it’s not true. Brian had become more brazen with his affairs. He didn’t care anymore what excuse he gave me for his absences. He’d lost all his respect and sense of responsibility toward me. Dick was such a comfort to me then. If people think I turned to him for more than friendship, they’ll just have to think it.”

“I think it’d be wonderful if that’s what happened. And now it really doesn’t matter.”

“It does to some people. I’m supposed to observe a period of mourning.”

“For someone who was divorcing you?! For someone who’d been humiliating you for a long time?!”

“For my children’s father. Whatever I do, I do for my sons.”

“Have you thought of your future? Insurance money will last only so long. It’s wise to be self-sufficient.”

“I know. Brian owned some property. I can liquidate that. Of course, a lot of his holdings were in partnership with his uncle Buck. Heavens knows if I can ever realize Brian’s share out of any of that. I would have to trust to the generosity of Buck’s heart, and the Conyers family has never been noted for its charity.”

“But what are you doing to do with your time? I don’t mean to be nosy, but I’m having to make the same decisions that you are. I’m not going back to the Culpeppers.”

“You’re not? Oh, Jess--”

“And here I am with the rest of my life staring me in the face. I have to do something. But it’s difficult to start over.”

“Beau said you weren’t happy with your life. I’m sorry that I was so wrapped up with my own problems that I didn’t have time to think about you. You’ve always been like my older sister. But
with your career and my marriage, we got separated. We should’ve kept in contact. I don’t know what happened.”

“It’ll probably split us up again. We’re at a breathing point at the moment, but we’ll both move on. And in separate ways, I expect.”

“We do tend to leave people behind,” Shelly said. “It’s sad, but true. We’ll probably both leave Clinton for good. You will, I know. You’ve left once; you’ll leave again. And I’ll finally break the chains that should’ve been broken a long time ago. I’m young enough to get some sort of training, then I’ll get a job somewhere. The boys and I will go to Memphis, I expect.”

“What about Dick?”

Shelly shrugged. “Who knows? I would like a future with him in it. But if that doesn’t work out, I’ll still have to raise Jared and Jason.”

“Sounds like you’re doing some hard thinking and making some tough decisions. And you’re not counting on any man to rescue you.”

Shelly leaned forward and clasped her hands together. “I want to be independent, Jessie. I want to stand on my own two feet. I’ve never had to do that. I’ve never gotten out in the world like you have. It’s kind of scary, but exhilarating, too. No wonder people treated me like a little mouse. I was. But no more. This worm is turning. And I’m going to do just fine.”

Jessie didn’t want to being fainthearted for fear of deflating Shelly’s resolve. Her brother Beau said Shelly needed to find backbone, and she apparently had.

“Yes, you are. I think you’ll succeed, Shelly. But how did you ever find so much spunk?”

“Well, like the cowboys say, someone put a burr under my tail. Brian’s mother paid me a visit and tried to tell me how to act. She said I wasn’t to see Dick anymore. I was a widow and should show grief. The more I thought about her ultimatums, the madder I got. Brian had always pushed me around, and his mother thought she could start in where he’d left off.”

“I’ve never heard of anything so awful! I hope you told her off good.”

Shelly giggled. “All the way out this front door and down the sidewalk to her car. She didn’t want a scene and I was creating a good one. I wouldn’t be shushed. I told her that Brian never thought of appearances when he was cheating on me. Everyone in town thought I was blind or stupid or both, and the truth was that I was under Brian’s thumb. I told her I couldn’t respect a man like that, nor could I grieve for him. Concern for my sons kept me from doing more. And I said if she ever wanted to see her grandsons again, she’d better keep her opinion of me to herself. I thought she’d have a stroke when I said that. She blanched dead white, and I knew I had a power over her. That threat sapped her strength and gave it to me. Brian’s mother won’t be a threat. Jess, you have no idea how much better I’ve felt about myself since that little encounter. I can make it in this world. I can raise my sons. I’m learning to be brave. And part of that bravery comes from letting joy into my life. Happiness could come from being with Dick. But if that fails, I know I have the strength inside me to be brave and to enjoy life. My future depends on me, and me alone.”

Shelly’s eyes fairly snapped with determination, and Jessie believed that Shelly could accomplish anything she set out to do. Once, Shelly had followed Jessie’s lead; now Jessie would have to be shown the way.

“What about you, Jessie? You said you weren’t sure of what to do, either.”
“My problems seem small compared to yours.”

“I don’t know about that. Not knowing whether to go back to the Culpeppers is bad enough. But what are you ever going to do with Sam Benedict’s marriage proposal?”

Jessie must’ve looked startled because Shelly began to laugh.

“You’re in a small town, Jessie. You’ve forgotten how small Clinton can be.”

“Apparently. Well, what do you think?”

“Of your situation? I’m glad I don’t have to trade.”

“Of Sam, you idiot! Not my situation! What do you think of Sam?”

Shelly sobered. “In his own way, I suppose that Sam Benedict is a good man. You could do better, Jess.”

“Once. Once, maybe. But now--”

“Don’t sell yourself short! That’s what I did. I recognize the signs. No, Jess, if there’s one thing I’ve learned through all my trouble with Brian, it’s that my happiness depends solely on me. I’m the one who’s responsible for putting joy into my life no one else. Whatever you decide about the Culpeppers or about Sam, remember to be kind to yourself. And smile a little!” Her face lit up with a grin and Jessie managed a tight-lipped answer. “Smile, my darling cousin! Bring joy into your life, and it will reach into the lives of others.”

Jessie couldn’t deny the truth of Shelly’s philosophy. Already Jessie felt better simply from being around the joy emitted by Shelly.

Shelly grabbed Jessie’s hand. “Come on!”

“Where are we going?”

“To learn some joy!”

They collected the four-year-old twin boys from their bedroom and took them to the small city park.

“I haven’t done this in years!” Jessie said as she swung beside Shelly. The boys squealed and ran near them toward the sandbox.

“Reach for the sky with your toes! That’s the secret of getting higher! You’ve got to reach! For anything!”

“That’s good advice!” Jessie said with a laugh.

Their laughter attracted the boys from their digging in the sandbox, and they came running up.

“Push me, Mommy!”

“I want Aunt Jessie to push me!”

“All right, Jason! Let’s go!”

Shelly and the boys giggled.
“That’s Jared.”

“Whichever! Let’s go, partner.”

Later, they walked in the meadow beyond the park and studied the gathering clouds.

“What do you see up there, Jessie?”

“An approaching storm.”

“Never! What do you see, boys?”

“A pirate ship!”

“A circus wagon! See the lion’s head?!”

“Do you see now, Jessie?”

“You’re all wrong,” Jessie answered. “It’s Santa’s face. See? He just winked. And you thought he only came around at Christmas time, didn’t you?”

The boys giggled.

“And I think you can see now, too, Jessie. When you give someone else joy, you receive it back.”

Yes, Jessie did see. She breathed deeply and looked around her. Soon the earth would be greening into a wonderful spring. Life would be renewing itself, and Jessie would be a part of it.

“There was a time, not too long ago, that all I saw was an approaching storm in rolling clouds.”

“Really?” Jessie glanced at her cousin. “Then how--”

“Brian was the one who saw a changing panorama in the sky. He was the one with the imagination. He taught me to see. He taught me to believe in possibilities. I have to make sure that his imagination is nurtured in the boys. It will be the good part of his legacy to them.”

“I thought you’d blank all memory of him out of them.”

“He was their father. They will have to grow up without him, and that’s going to be hard enough on them. No reason why they should be torn by love for him and disgust for some of his actions. Brian had many talents; they weren’t all bad. He wasn’t a complete villain, you know. He could be quite gentlemanly and considerate, when he wanted to be. Or he thought people were watching. He made me happy to be female. At least, he did in the beginning of our marriage. I fell in love with him once. I could have again if he’d only, ah, wanted me.”

She shook her head as if to clear it. “I loved him once,” she whispered. “I really did. He was my first sweetheart.”

“Oh, Shelly, we’ve all forgotten that.”

Tears sprang into Shelly’s eyes. ‘I haven’t. I won’t. A small part of me will always be in love with Brian, despite everything that happened. He trusted me. I know it sounds stupid, but he considered me to be a haven. That’s why his pride was hurt when he had to file for divorce. I guess it’s the old double standard still working. And if there’s one thing that’ll haunt me about our relationship, it’ll be that I let him down.”

“You really don’t have to feel guilty about that.”
“I know.” Shelly’s smile quivered. “But maybe women believe in the double standard, too. After all, haven’t we had it all very carefully taught to us since we were toddlers? Ladies are little ladies. Stroke the male ego. Yes, Jess, we were carefully taught.”

Jessie nodded. Shelly was absolutely right.

The red sports car skidded to a halt, and a whirl of bright clothing hopped onto the sidewalk beside Jessie as she stood in front of the Five And Dime.

“Jessie!”

Jessie stared.

“Jessie Horne!”

Jessie stared at the young woman as much as if she would a Martian who had just emerged from a flying saucer that had just landed on the Main Street of her home town. “Marlys? My god, Marlys! What are you doing here? In Clinton?! How did you ever find me?”

“Well, believe me, it wasn’t easy. Now I know where to head if I ever want to drop off the face of the Earth. Nobody would ever think to look for me here.” Gold hoop earrings flashed as Marlys gave the Main Street a sweeping glance. “This is it? This is where you grew up? What kept you from dying of boredom?”

“We didn’t know any better. What ARE you doing here?!?”

“I wanted to see what the attraction was. Now that I’m here, I still don’t know.”

“Oh, it’s okay, when you get used to it. Just don’t get upset when people know your business and know your whereabouts.”

Marlys grinned. “And know who you’re doing?”

Jessie grinned back. Gosh, it was good seeing someone from the outside world, someone from her life as of three weeks ago in Nashville. Want to come into the drugstore and get a soda? You must be thirsty.”

“People still go to the drugstore for a soda? I don’t believe this place!” Marlys rolled her green eyes. “It’s something straight out of a hillbilly movie! It’s almost a cliché!”

Jessie felt her back stiffen.

“What a slice of Americana!” Marlys continued.

Jessie had to remind herself that Marlys was a big city girl and was merely repeating the accepted viewpoint of small towns. If Jessie hadn’t been involved with country-western music, she would’ve been reluctant to admit her country roots. Besides, she couldn’t quarrel with Marlys. The girl had been in town only five minutes, and they were old friends.

Jessie smiled. “Where do you think those movie writers get their ideas? Every fiction has to be based on fact. It all depends on your perspective. This town seems normal to us.” Jessie wasn’t about to admit how quaint, almost CORNY, the town had felt when she’d returned to it for her father’s wedding. She thought it’d been some lack in her, some normalcy that seemed just left of center.
Now she recognized the problem: She had grown, the town had not. Exposure to the larger, outside world had given her sophistication. She understood that, but she still bristled at Marlys’ rebukes and found herself feeling protective of the shabby old place, much as she would for a three-legged dog or a senile great-grandfather.

“It does look like a Victorian movie set,” Marlys said.

“Want me to fix some cinnamon tea now? We can take it on the veranda and watch the Negras as they bring the cotton in from the fields.”

But Marlys was on a roll now and wouldn’t be distracted by Jessie’s sarcasm. “Amend that. Wrong setting. Not Victorian. I forgot how far Down South that these small towns still are.” She decided to be kind. “Their quaintness just adds to their charm.”

“Thank you. I think so, too. But it has to grow on you. I’m feeling better about its ’charm’ than when I first got back.”

“I could understand that! A person would have to be awfully open minded and accepting. But that cemetery I passed coming into town! Hunters?! Come on now! Who’s got the sense of humor around here?”

Jessie was truly puzzled. “The Hunter family donated the land over a century ago. It’s THE place to bury for all the long-established families, especially those of English descent who walked out of the Appalachians a few years after Daniel Boone showed them the way through the Cumberland Gap.”

“But the name! Hunters! What a name for a cemetery, for God’s sake! When I first saw it, the wild idea went through my mind that here’s where all the sportsmen took their kill when they didn’t want to skin it!”

Jessie blinked. Actually, she felt like she’d been punched in the stomach. She wasn’t as sophisticated as she’d thought. It’d taken someone who really was an outsider to point out an anachronism right under her nose. And such an obvious one, at that. Never mind that she’d known the cemetery all her life. She should’ve seen for herself the black humor in the cemetery’s name.

Yet, there the name stood, for all to see, and Jessie had missed the double meaning all this time. And where did that leave her? She wasn’t really a part of this town anymore, but it was a part of her heritage. She might leave it, but it would never leave her.

Perhaps that was what made a person, a group, or an area seem quaint to outsiders. To insiders, nothing changed. The sameness offered security, but blindness. In a society in which television provided an instantaneous and uniform oneness, it was still wise to remember that pockets of bucolic individuality flourished. And quite well, thank you. We’re happy in our supposed ignorance.

Jessie managed a quick smile. “That’s nothing. Wait until you see the duck blinds down by the river. We don’t actually blind ducks down there, you know. Or we can take in the saw mill. But don’t be disappointed, because we don’t--”

Marlys pointed a finger at Jessie. “You don’t actually saw the mill, right?!”

Both girls hooted with laughter, and all was well between them again.

Jessie took Marlys by the arm and steered her toward the drugstore. “Come on, let’s go have that soda now. And you can tell me how you wound up here. Did you get lost? Surely, you didn’t come here on purpose. What do we have that Nashville doesn’t? How are things in Nashville, anyway?”
Marlys stopped. “I hate to spoil your good mood, Jessie, but I’m not here by accident. Chad sent me.”

“That’s what I figured.”

“He wanted me to find out if you’d completely lost your mind. And after he explained about your phone call to him, it got me to wondering about your sanity, also. Jessie, are you really thinking of not returning to The Culpeppers?”

“Yes.”

“But, why? Is it a man?”

“Partly. And partly because I’m starting to realize what’s really important in life.” She took Marlys by the arm again. “Come on. I’ll explain over a soda. You’ll love the chocolate ones. Harvey may not have very modern fountain equipment, but he makes glorious sodas. It’s part of what I missed up in Nashville.”

Marlys looked skeptical, but allowed herself to be led into the drugstore.

“You’ve been avoiding me, Sam.”

Sam Benedict looked up from his desk. “No, I haven’t, Jessie. I’ve been busy. Besides, you’ve been having company lately.”

“Marlys is gone. She has been for over a week now. Sam, I know when someone is deliberately staying out of my way. Why, you’ve even stopped going to church, just because you knew I’d turn up there on Sunday mornings.”

Sam tossed a pencil on the desk. “Look, you made it pretty clear that you didn’t want me around. It was your idea, not mine.”

“I’m sorry it happened. It was my fault.”

“Jess, you don’t have to put yourself through this--”

“Let me apologize if I want to.”

“Okay.”

“In my own way.”

“You don’t have to do this,” he repeated.

“But I do. I was wrong and--”

Sam held up his hands. “Okay. Okay. You’ve apologized. Whatever you were wanting to say, it’s accepted. Now, do you feel better?”

“Only if we go out for a ride together.”

“A ride?!! It’s foggy. The rain could start again at any moment.”

“What better time?” she asked brightly. “The roads will be deserted.”
He followed her out the door. “Are you sure you’re feeling okay? You seem different somehow.”

“It’s spring, Sam. Don’t you feel it in the air?”

He frowned. “Something’s in the air, all right, and I don’t think it’s entirely the spring.”

“Oh, don’t be such an old fuddy-duddy!”

“Fuddy-duddy? Now, I do know you’re off in the head.”

“Are you going to drive, or do I have to?”

“My pickup? My pride and joy? I think you know the answer to that one, Missy.”

“Good! That means I’m navigating.”

Sam crawled in and snapped his seat belt. “Where to, navigator?”

Jessie adjusted her seat belt around herself and looked out the windshield. “Tucker’s Mill, pilot.”

“Tucker’s Mill?! It’ll be wet and miserable out there.”

“Oh, Sam, where’s your sense of adventure?”

“Where’s your sense?”

“Sam, Sam, Sam, what am I going to do with you?”

He studied her. He was too curious to deny her and too puzzled to laugh. “Navigate me, I guess.”

With a grumble he pulled away from the curb while she slapped his arm and laughed.

“See? Wet and miserable, just like I said it’d be.”

They peered through the fog at the gray weathered boards glistening in dismal unwelcome. The bleak afternoon light did nothing to enhance the old abandoned mill.

“Don’t you just love the trees this time of year?” she countered with a bright smile and a brave look around at the patchy foliage around the unwelcoming scene.

Sam bent to look out of the pickup windshield at the bare tree branches etched starkly against the fog.

“Looks pretty hostile to me.”

Jessie hugged his arm and leaned toward him. “Makes me feel warm and secure when I’m safe and dry somewhere cozy.” She cuddled closer to him. “Like now.” She glanced at him. “You know, you asked me to marry you, but you’ve never kissed me.” She leaned toward him. “Do you want to correct that oversight, or do you need a big city gal to show you how it’s done down in Nashville?”

After a few moments, she settled back against the seat. “Hmm. That was a nice, friendly kiss, Sam. You made me feel like your sister. I’ve gotten more excited over a handshake.”

“Until I figure out what the hell’s going on, that’s all you’re getting.”
Jessie giggled. “You won’t have to fight for your honor, Sam. I didn’t bring you up here to seduce you.”

“What, then? What the hell are we doing out in the middle of this goddamn fog that could turn into cold rain at any minute?”

“Because it’s spring, Sam, and we have to celebrate it!” She jumped out of the pickup.

“What?! What the hell?! Jess!” Sam jumped out of the pickup, too. “Are you high on something, Jess?!”

With head thrown back and eyes closed, she was exposing her face to the droplets of water that formed the fog. “Yes! I’m high on Spring!”

He grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her. “Did you get some bad drugs in the city? Is that why you really went to St. Louis? You were getting low on drugs?”

At least her eyes were clear and solemn now. “I don’t do drugs, Sam.”

“Then what?”

“Look at me, Sam.”

Somehow those solemn eyes were more difficult to deal with than her frivolous mood.

“Look into my eyes, Sam. Look. Please. Look. What do you see?”

He frowned, but he found he could look into those honest, solemn eyes. “A good, decent woman with, ah--“ He frowned. “--with--”

“With what, Sam?”

He started grinning. How could he have ever feared such eyes? Beneath their solemn demeanor were purity and bravery. “With a shine in her eyes I’ve never seen before. She’s on fire with living. What’s happened to you, Jessie?”

“I’ve found joy, Sam. I’ve found joy and I want to share it. We’ve been much too serious. That’s what’s killing us, Sam. That’s why it seems like we’ve been left behind. We’ve forgotten how to enjoy ourselves. But no more. If we do nothing else with the rest of our lives, we have to stop having so much control over ourselves and learn how to live.”

“That accident in St. Louis did this to you, didn’t it?”

“Partly. But Shelly Conyers taught me more.”

“Shelly?”

“You know what a quaking little rabbit she’s always been. Well, she’s done an about-face. I always led her, but now I follow.” She looked around the meadow. “Do you see the grass, Sam? It’s brown from the winter’s cold. But if you look closely, you can see the new grass greening down inside last year’s, down underneath where it’s protected. That’s what we have to look for, Sam. New life. The new grass coming on. We have to look for the promise of tomorrow.”

“Is that why we’re out in this boggy meadow? To look for tomorrow?” He was tiring of this little charade and one of the two people here needed to show a little sense.
“No, Sam, for yesterday.”

Just for a moment he thought he understood her, but then his reason overruled again. “Yeah, and we’re finding the rain of today. You’re getting soaked.” He shucked his jacket and draped it over her shoulders. Wet places appeared on his shirt.

She grabbed his hands holding her shoulders. “Don’t fight me on this, Sam.”

“Won’t you get back in the pickup now where it’s dry?” His voice was soft and mellow and had lost its urgency. The words were the words that a reasonable man would speak, whether the man truly meant them or not. His eyes, by this time, spoke that he wanted to believe in this woman, no matter how rash her statements or how wild her schemes.

“The rain is warm, Sam. It won’t hurt us. I know it feels cold to our skins, but we can warm it. We can do anything, Sam, as long as we think we can. You missed something back in high school when you didn’t look at me. You were the big football hero, and the cheerleaders fought over you. Well, they’re all gone now, Sam, and I’m the one who’s here with you now. And I’m not here to prove a point.” She breathed deeply. “You ask me to marry you, and that might well be the biggest mistake of your life. Because I accept your offer, Sam Benedict.” She took a deep breath. “So there. And I feel sorry for you, you poor, dumb bastard.”

He broke into a grin.

“I don’t know what your reasons were to propose, but you just bought yourself a bundle of wildcat, mister. I won’t make it easy for you. You’ll have to march to my tune from now on.”

His eyes were mellow as he rubbed her upper arms. “Don’t talk tough to me, lady, I can see right through it. You asked why I want to spend the rest of my life with you? Because I think we’ll be good for each other. I think we’ve been beaten up by Life just about enough, and we need something better. I know it’s taken years for me to look at you, but I don’t think I could’ve seen you any sooner the way I’m seeing you now.”

“We can’t hide away from Life with each other.”

“Why not? Besides, you think that’s all we’ll be doing?” He bent and kissed her.

She lifted her head. “Now, that was better than a handshake.” She searched his eyes. “Won’t you come into the mill with me now? Just like the teenagers do? We should’ve made the trip years ago, but it’s not too late. We’ll just turn the clock back a little, if we need to.” Her eyes crackled up at him. “But I won’t think we’ll have to do that. I think we’ll get along just fine ‘doing what comes naturally,’ as the song says.”

He seemed fascinated as he grinned down at her. The rain had plastered her long dark hair to her face. He reached out and wiped rain beads off her cheek.

“You should’ve told me sooner how stupid I’ve been.”

“I didn’t know myself,” she whispered. “It’s taken me ten years to figure it out.”

He drew her to him, and they forgot about the rain and everything else except themselves. The rain’s dampness had chilled their cheeks and had given their hair a musty smell which somehow was exciting in the damp air.

“I never knew one little jacket could cover two people,” Sam murmured as he held Jessie around the waist.
Jessie giggled nervously, then caught her breath in sharply as his cold hand touched her bare back. He’d found the path under her blouse.

“Know of a good, cheap motel around here?” he asked, and his voice was unsteady with primitive emotion.

The ‘motel’ had to be perfect.

Hand in hand, they shyly walked to the old mill.

The ‘motel’ would be perfect.

The next afternoon they eloped to Memphis. While there, they toured Elvis’s home at Graceland and Sun Studio where Elvis got his start. They also saw the ducks at the Peabody Hotel as they strolled out of an elevator and down a red carpet to spend time in a fountain in the hotel’s main lobby. Sam and Jessie ate barbecue ribs and crayfish cakes at quaint little restaurants on the wharf and rode a riverboat out on the Mississippi while they watched the sun set into the heart of Arkansas. They were gone for three days.

Jessie leaned her head on Sam’s shoulder as he drove toward Clinton. “You think your brother can get a job lined up for you where he works down in Birmingham?”

“He thought so. I sure as hell hope so. I kinda walked away from my police job in Clinton.” He gave her a grin. “Seems like I had pressing business elsewhere.”

“You bet your sweet ass you did.” She looked at her plain gold band. “And don’t you be forgetting it.”

“That ring might be on your finger, honey, but it’s actually run through my nose. I’m going wherever it’s going.”

“Sure hope we can make a good home for ourselves down in Birmingham. I’ll be a fresh start for both of us.”

“It’ll be good being close to Brad again. I think we were both excited about doing the brother thing. Never thought I was going to make him understand me, though, when I called. He couldn’t believe I was married.” He smiled at the head on his shoulder. “There’s times I don’t believe it myself.”

She arched an eyebrow at him. “Believe it, mister.” She snuggled against his shoulder again.

“Wish I could make Tucker’s Mill into a shrine.”

“I thought that was what you wanted to do with that motel room back in Memphis.”

Same grinned. “Nah. I just wanted to retire the bed. It’s had the best people using it. It’s worn out now.”

She slapped his arm and he laughed.

“Is this what you mean by joy, Jessie? What I’m feeling with you now? If so, I’m all for it.”

“We have a lifetime of joy ahead of us, Sam.” She spread her hand over his as he drove.

He looked down at her hand resting on his. “Know what you’re telling your mother about us?”
“No.” She glanced up at him. “How can I explain joy to someone’s who’s never felt it?”

“She’ll just have to accept your news. You’re an adult.”

“That’s all she can do. But how do I explain that I can only come home by leaving again? I’d be just her little girl here, and Sam Benedict would be that poor boy from the big family on the wrong side of town. We need a fresh start, Sam, and we’ll find it in Birmingham.”

“Whatever you say, Jess. You’re my woman now and my life’s with you.”

Jessie sighed with contentment. Her heart was home at last.

The television was blaring when Jessie slipped into her mother’s trailer. “Hello, Mama.”

Billie Horne stared at the plain gold band on her daughter’s hand. “Then it’s true.”

“Yes, Mama.” Jessie tensed, aware of how much she’d dreaded this moment. “I’m married.”

“How come you wanted to be tied down to Sam Benedict?”

“Maybe I just wanted to be tied down to SOMETHING.” And just by saying it made her realize it was true. She’d gotten the seven year itch, all right, but it wasn’t an itch to be free. She wanted roots now. And suddenly the familiar, homey surroundings of her youth flooded her with a warmth that she hadn’t experienced since she was a starry-eyed teenager. She had wanted to come home and home she going to be, even if home was to be Birmingham, Alabama. And if Sam Benedict was her ticket there, she was also his. Other couples built a future on a lot less.

“He’s a good man, Mama.”

“Humph! He’s a man.”

“And he’s my friend.”

“Friendship changes. Love changes. I ought to know. Don’t you think that your daddy and I believed all that stuff when we were just starting out?” She straightened and sniffed in disdain. “You mark my words. You’ll find out, just as I did. It’ll change.”

“I’ll just have to take my chances, then. That’s all that anybody gets, isn’t it? A chance? There’s no guarantees in this life.” She needlessly straightened a crocheted doily on an end table. “Seeing that woman get killed in St. Louis did something to me, Mama. She had it all. Beauty, brains, loving husband, home, kids, successful career, respect, money. And still she died in the street. None of what she’d had could help her. But she’d had it. She’d known what it was to have all that. And I got to thinking about what I had. What did I have, after all? The group I sang with would adjust without me. My family back home could live without me. Before you say it, I know it’s true. You’ve lived without me being around for ten years. Sure, I pop in and out once in awhile. Dying like that lady did would just mean I wouldn’t be popping in and out anymore. I want roots, Mama.”

“You’ll be sorry!”

“Maybe.”

“But why Sam Benedict? He’s as rootless as you are.”

“Maybe together we can establish a life. Maybe we can build a solid home where children can grow
up secure.”

Billie snorted in disdain. “So, you’re going to try living the American Dream! Good luck with that! You’ll find out it’s all an illusion.”

“It’s the same dream you had when you got married, Mama. I know it is. Please be happy for me.”

“I’ll console you when the time comes for this all to fall apart on you, and it will. Mark my words, it’ll happen to you. You’ll need me more then.”

“I hope you’re wrong, Mama. We’re really going to try to have a good marriage. But we can’t do it here.”

“What?! I thought--”

“That I’d stay here and wallow in self-pity with you?”

Billie gasped.

“In many ways that’d be easier. But I gotta try, Mama. I gotta try to live. And so do you.”

“What do you mean? I’m doing okay.”

“No, you aren’t, Mama. You gotta start over. Lose weight. Get a job. Date again. You’re still pretty, or would be if you made an effort. Just try.”

“That’s easy for you to say!”

“I know it’ll be hard to do. But, Mama, you gotta realize, once and for all, that Daddy just isn’t ever coming back to you.”

“Who says I’d take him back?!?”

“I do. You’d take him back in a minute. Hell, a heartbeat.”

Billie’s nostrils flared with anger, and she was breathing rapidly. “Well, I’m glad I finally learned what’s wrong with me!”

“Mama--”

“I don’t need no not-nosed kid telling me off!”

“Mama, I’m not trying to be mean. And I’m no kid anymore. We’re talking, woman to woman.”

“I’m still not taking that kind of talk from you!”

“Mama, I’m just trying to help.”

“Well, it isn’t helping, understand?! Just go on and leave! Get out of here!”

“Mama--”

“Go on!”

“I’ll send you my address when we get located somewhere.” She paused at the door. “I know you don’t mean any of what you’ve said, Mama. I know you’ll realize it’s all for the best, my leaving
with Sam. I had to return to my past to find my future. Now I can make something of my life. I hope you’ll be able to do likewise.” She opened the door and left.

Billie fumed at the closed door. The hell she didn’t mean what she’d said! Jessie would learn of her gumption, just as Wayne had.

Billie threw herself in her recliner and flipped on her TV. A game show blared on the screen. Billie crammed a chocolate cream into her mouth. She didn’t even taste it. The contestant on the screen won a thousand dollars. What Billie could do with a thousand dollars! A new red dress. Fancy earrings. Wayne always did like red on her. He would again.

She didn’t even realize it when she reached for another chocolate cream.

Jessie tossed her suitcase into the pickup bed and slid into the cab. “Let’s go,’ she said in a deadpan voice and stared ahead.

Sam studied her. “How’d it go?”

Jessie frowned. “About as well as I’d expected.”

“Are you going to be okay?”

“Sure.”

Sam nodded toward the trailer. “What about her?”

“Nothing I said fazed her. She’ll always be the same.” Jessie shrugged. “Forget it. It’s my problem.”

“Not anymore. It’s our problem.”

Jessie studied him, then gave him a soft smile. “Boy, when you get married, you really get married, don’t you?”

“I’ll be there for you, Jess. We may not love each other yet, but I’m going to be the best friend you ever had. And the love? It’ll come in time. We just have to be patient with each other, and with whatever Fate throws our way.”

She ran her eyes over his face and realized how dear he had already grown to her. Perhaps he was right. Perhaps love would find them yet. Wouldn’t that be a bonus for two losers like them? Perhaps their high school math teacher really had been right, and two negatives did make a positive.

She ran her hand over his hand gripping the steering wheel. “Thanks, Sam. How did your family take the news?”

He grinned. “They wanted to throw us a party. I said we didn’t have time now, but maybe we could come back in about a month if they were still in a party mood.” He blushed slightly. “Mom said we could have a baby cooking by that time, too. I said she wouldn’t notice another grandchild with all the ones she had, but she claimed she would. Dad said that expecting a baby would look good on you, because you needed some fattening up.”

She smiled back. “I think I’m going to like your folks. And as far as my mother goes, there’s only so far we can go with some people. Sometimes we just have to turn a person loose. We owe our lives to ourselves.”
“We won’t give up on her, Jess. That baby you may be cooking in a month might soften her up.”

“That’d be a miracle!”

“Don’t underestimate the power of a baby. I’ve seen totally reasonable people turn to mush when they became grandparents. My folks did.”

Jessie’s eyes glowed. “You’re good for me, Sam. You give me hope.”

“And you give me joy. Thought I might mention that in case you get to feeling blue. You’ve changed one person in this old world, and I’m glad you have.”

They smiled tenderly at each other, knowing that a wonderful future lay ahead for them together.

Sam pulled away from the curb in front of Billie’s trailer, and the pickup coasted down the street. Unseen by them, a curtain fell into place in a nearby house.

So Jessie Horne was married! And to Sam Benedict, of all people! They’d never amount to a whole lot of anything now, either one of them, but sometimes people get so that doesn’t matter anymore. Trash! Both of them, nothing but trash! Like finds like, Mother would say. Not like our kind, at all.

She dropped the lace curtain she’d been peeking around and frowned. Despite everything, Jessie had looked contented as she’d left her mother’s trailer and slid in beside Sam in his old pickup. A companionable smile had even passed between the newly married couple before they drove away.

Better finish the dusting in the parlor before time to go pick up Mother from the church circle meeting. Then she’d probably want to go out to the cemetery to see if Father’s tombstone looked as good with the grass greening up around it as it did surrounded by snow. And she’d probably crow again that the tombstone was more expensive than Uncle Paul’s beside it. Mother and Aunt Clarice had always tried to better each other, but this contest of the tombstones seemed to be carrying matters too far. The daughter thought that such a show of wealth was a little gaudy out in a cemetery. After all, wasn’t Death supposed to be The Great Equalizer?

But this wasn’t getting the dusting done. She could almost hear her mother: Man is basically lazy. Sloth was one of the Seven Deadly Sins. When given the option, no one works harder than necessary. Mother was certainly right on that one.

Dust flew around a desk calendar, and she noted the spring month. Several months had passed since Father’s death, and the Easter holiday was approaching. That would be a difficult time, perhaps far more difficult than his funeral, for now the fact had finally penetrated that he, indeed, was gone, for good. Blessed numbness had protected the daughter at the funeral when she had found herself uttering words that had sounded hollow, especially to herself. Perhaps the people who sought to comfort her were just happy she hadn’t broken down.

Yes, any holiday would be difficult, but his birthday in the fall would be worse. There’d be nothing to celebrate, and that day had been special all her life. Now, the wistful, expectant day would simply feel, she supposed, incomplete, like she and Mother were neglecting something important and could not remember what it was.

There was the cushion for the daughter that her mother still lived. Mother had always been the driving force in the family. If SHE had died instead of Father, the family would’ve been devastated. And the old maid daughter would’ve had to have worked harder. For Father had been completely dependent on Mother and would become the same as an adult child.
Mother continued the household work as she’d always done. The daughter felt safe. Mother had made the world secure again.

But the daughter sometimes realized what it’d be like to be really alone. To live with domineering, aging parents meant that their deaths seemed the only escape to a marking-time old maid. One down, one to go. How awful to have such thoughts!

She’d even made plans. Life would be simplified and uncomplicated. But a tiny doubt loomed in the back of her mind. Habits have a way of overriding plans. She’d probably continue to live the way she’d been raised, and she’d become one of the quaint persons she’d laughed at as a child.

There! That finished the dusting in the parlor. Now, she had to hurry to pick up Mother.

She maneuvered the old Cadillac through the residential streets that were etched firmly in her memory. Nothing much had changed these houses since she had been a little girl. But each change was duly noted and her brain re-adjusted the town pattern in her mind.

The Cadillac was balky today. Soon it would have to be traded for another used car. Father always said it was better to drive a second-hand Cadillac than a new Chevy. Appearances had to be very carefully maintained, even if the fringes of living were becoming shabby. That’s why impractical lace curtains hung at the parlor windows instead of drapes. Drapery would cut the heat of summer and the cold of winter and would be easier to maintain, but they were so commonplace. Lace lent a touch of elegance and spoke of gentler, more affluent times. County officials and even state legislators had come to Father for advice. All of that prestige and power were gone now. But the family could keep the trappings that reminded them of grander days.

Jessie Horne stayed in her mind. Jessie probably didn’t have anything set aside to set up housekeeping. When she settled somewhere, Jessie would probably stop at K-Mart and buy a set of plastic dishes and some gaudy tea towels. The quality of Jessie’s kitchen items would not compare to the lovely articles in her own hope chest. Grandma’s Haviland China with only three pieces missing stood in the antique cabinet meant for her home. Butter soft linens dripping with heavy ruching lay folded neatly in the cedar chest she’d received upon graduating from high school. Tooled silver toiletry bottles graced her mahogany dresser. At least she was getting some use out of that part of her hope chest.

She smirked. Hopeless chest was more accurate a term for those items. The only pleasure she’d have was the honor of caring for them. At this rate she’d never use them, because chances were very slim that she’d ever have a house of her own now. She’d inherit her parents’ home. And when she was gone, her hope chest would go to her cousin’s children in Mobile. The items would have no sentimental value for those strangers who’d quickly convert the antiques into cash. Someday, some dog would probably be lapping his water out of Grandma’s Haviland China soup dish.

She was so deep in thought that she didn’t see the puddle of rainwater until she’d driven through it and splashed two men standing on the curb at the drugstore corner. She should go back and apologize, but a glance in the rear view mirror showed her that the two men were dressed in country work clothes. Farmers were used to mud. A little more wouldn’t hurt them. She drove on. Mother would be waiting.

“Damn arrogant bitch!” one man swore as he slapped dirty water off the legs of his overalls. “Never even stopped!”

“Maybe she had to shit,” his companion muttered. “Rich bitches like her kind put off taking a dump for so long that they either dirty their silk drawers or bind themselves up tighter than a bull's ass in fly time. That shriveled up cunt she's sporting probably ain't never seen the light of day or felt a man's
hand tangled in her fuzz. All she cares about is that designer dress from Gay Paree that she’s wearing like God ordered it special for her.”

“Hell, she probably ordered Him to make sure she got the damn dress!” He wiped at mud on his knee. “Thinks she’s in such a goddamn hurry! I know what that kind needs alright to learn some manners. A good dicking! And I wouldn’t mind tackling that job, just to wait her up to the real world!”

“Might not be safe, though. A face as sour looking as hers goes with a frozen cunt. She’d probably snap it right off for you.”

“She and her mama are rich as Croesus. They must have money stuffed in the mattresses. Might be worth the trouble of finding out.”

His friend guffawed with laughter. “You damned fool! She’d have her nose so high in the air, she wouldn’t even know you were messing with her skirt. Who knows? She might have a mousetrap hidden under it, anyway.”

“And she might be ready to climb all over some guy. You never know what those old maids are thinking.”

“I do know what your old lady would be thinking, though. And doing! She’d skin you alive.”

“Knowing her, she’d just be satisfied with trimming off my balls and frying them up for breakfast. I never thought she’d be such a ball buster when I married her.”

“Oh, they all look hot when they’re young. And they all turn into bitches.”

They shuffled along a few steps.

“That prune face in the Cadillac is like those kernels you find in the bottom of a sack of popcorn.”

“You mean the old maids?”

“Yeah, those are the ones. You know what their trouble is, don’t you?”

“Yeah, they ain’t been popped yet.”

The men guffawed in laughter as they walked on down the street.

Back in Nashville, Luke Murdock sauntered into a messy office, sprawled into a rickety chair, leaned back, and crossed his feet on the desk. “Chad, where the hell is Jessie Horne? I thought she’d have her ass back here by now. Almost everybody gets enough of being home after a month.”

Chad leaned back in his nearby chair and stretched his arms over his head. “She ain’t coming back, Luke.”

Luke’s feet hit the floor. “The hell you say!”

“That’s what she told me. She called yesterday and said she’d gotten married and was settling down.”

“Jessie?! Our Jessie? You’re shitting me.”
“I shit you not. It’s the truth, Luke.”

Luke mulled it over and shook his head. “It won’t last. Jessie’s the kind of gal who plants her roots in sand.”

“She sounded pretty sure of herself on the phone.”

“They all do. Oh, well, whatever happens, she won’t be back here. By the time she wakes up, her chances in Nashville will have passed her by. She’ll wind up raising babies and waiting tables in some backwater town that’s on its way to a slow death.”

“What chances are you talking about? She never had much of a career here in Nashville. And neither one of us ever offered her marriage.” Chad frowned. “I guess you never proposed to her. Did you?”

“Hell, no!” Luke thought, then finally smirked. “Would you have married her?”

“Probably not. I didn’t have to. She didn’t offer much resistance when I invited her up to my apartment.”

“Wonder why this dude married her? Didn’t he know it could be gotten free, no strings attached?”

“He’s probably some yokel dazzled that some celebrity actually looked his way.”

“Jessie?! A celebrity?! Shit!”

“The guy she married doesn’t live in Nashville, Luke. There’s folks out there who still believe in marriage. Otherwise, we wouldn’t be able to peddle all that sentimental clap-trap over the airwaves.” He rustled some papers on the desk. “But that means we have to pick a new backup singer.”

Luke smirked. “Is that going to be a problem? Teenage girls are breaking our doors down, trying to get with The Culpeppers, or some other group like them. Hell, they can all sing.”

“That’s why their other talents are judged, also. Their personalities. Their overall appearance. Their stage presence.”


“It is all taken into account,” Chad answered with a smirk.

“And they all have pointy tits and tight, hot asses, right? Lordy, it must be hell to have to interview them all.”

Chad’s smirk deepened. “It’s a living.”

Luke’s grin matched the knowing look in his eyes. “Anytime you need help with auditions, you just let me know.”

The two men looked at each other and laughed.

The old pickup lumbered down the country black top. Sweet spring air flowed in the open windows and blended with the tinny country-western song pouring out of the radio. This was a perfect day. At long last, the two drifters had found something to cling to, and they were happy and contended to meet their futures together. For the first time in years, life looked good for both of them. It was waiting for them, just ahead.
The woman brushed long, dark hair out of her face and caressed the hand of the man as he drove. Sam Benedict glanced at her and smiled. Jessie Horne Benedict smiled back, then studied the road opening up before them. She breathed deeply with complete satisfaction. It was going to be a wonderful spring. It was good to be alive.

Five miles ahead of them, an overloaded stock truck wove erratically along the yellow line. The driver was young and inexperienced and wouldn’t be able to hold the wheel when he met Sam’s pickup head-on a few minutes later.

Only a few feet of skid marks would be laid down to point out the crash. The impact would happen as suddenly as a swatter coming down on a fly. All three people would die instantly. One moment they were alive, and the next, they just weren’t.

For Jessie, the pickup moved further down the road. Then she realized that Sam’s arm was no longer under her hand. Then she realized she no longer had a hand, or any other part of the body she’d called home for thirty-odd years. But she knew no fear, because she was going up, up, up to a bright light where Sam was waiting. They would be together for this next journey before them. She’d been willing to travel with him on Earth, why not up here? Why should she be afraid of the future, as long as she had Sam?

Some deaths happen when least expected, without logic or dignity, and leave a deep feeling of incompleteness and bewilderment. Some deaths are a welcome relief for the person and those around him or her. Some deaths can even be an inspiration to the ones left behind.

And some deaths just don’t make any sense.
Mary Grace, Before

Southeastern Ohio has a wistful, melancholy feel about it as if it were waiting to be returned to a former grandeur. Drive through it and sense that in some long ago time more people lived in these Appalachian foothills than do now. The hills and valleys seem crowded with their memories and yearn for the brave adventures and zestful vitality that marked those sturdy pioneers when the land itself was younger. Descendants of the settlers seem pale and thin-blooded in comparison.

It’s possible to lose oneself on the back roads of the area and know how deserted the land felt after the Indians left and before the white men settled the area. Modern day white men have abandoned the farms and migrated to the nearby sprawling cities. Small towns stand forlorn, exhausted, and worn out. Signs of past glory stare back in tattered defiance at the occasional bewildered strangers who unwittingly pass through the nearly deserted region. Consider the forgotten statue of the Civil War soldier in the town square, a wooden bandstand with its roof caving in, the WCTU water fountain with rust choked pipes, and the murky cemeteries overgrown with trees. The people who built these have long since passed into oblivion, much the same as their crusades, their heartbreaks, and their victories have faded from memory.

Some of the people who currently exist here have taken a step backwards, too. Sure, they have television sets and VCR players. Sure, they can name the President of the United States and the leading Hollywood movie stars. They eat McDonald hamburgers and wear acid-washed jeans. But that’s all part of the outside world, the world of the cities. Inside these people’s heads and hearts are lived far simpler, more basic lives.

Many of these people have reverted back to the folkways and superstitions of their ancestors who came from England, Ireland, and Scotland. Over two centuries ago, British immigrants were once in the mainstream of activity in the growing English colonies of the Eastern Seaboard of what was to become the nucleus of America. Their children moved westward into the mountains, savored the companionship of solitude, and melted into the hills. Further generations picked their way through valleys, populated the peaks of the Appalachians, and filtered into Ohio.

Their locale changed, but they clung to their culture. Their ballads became the basis for country-western music. Their sturdiness in battle was legendary, as war after war plagued these settlers. But such is the way of men. For where there are men to be found, there also will conflict be found.

But some people tried to draw themselves, their families, and their way of life into a compact, protected area. They succeeded, but too well. For new lifeblood, no new vitality entered into their lives. It is a law of nature that the world is in constant change. Or it should be. Otherwise, stagnation sets in. And that is what happened to a lot of the whole Appalachian region. And stagnation isn’t good, for people or for the country in which they live. Isolation made these people and their traditions quaint, as isolation does everywhere. As the younger generations escaped to the cities for opportunity, the older generations shook their heads in sorrow. The old ways were changing, lost forever.

But not everybody left the rural areas. Some still clung to the land, living one step ahead of poverty and boredom. Some believed in the land, that it was the only true building block. Some preferred the isolation. Some had no choice. They were trapped.

Some of these people practice a fundamental religion colored highly by their belief in nature as well as God. They attend camp meetings and praise the Lord, and the next morning prepare a love potion to attract an unsuspecting beau. They watch the weather forecast on TV, then study the sky, shake their heads, and smile with a secret knowledge. What do city people know of weather systems when
Mother Nature is plainly predicting something else?

Much of the area is covered by state and national forests. The people living here feel a kinship with the trees and with all of nature. They listen to an inner hum of the Earth and feel her vibrate with the life teeming on her and in her. And they smile again because the city people have forgotten how to listen to this hum.

Pisgah was one of those moldering hamlets in Southeastern Ohio. Two gas stations on the edge of town offered services to the infrequent passersby. The old railroad hotel at one corner of the town square rented rooms to single people who had no real homes anymore. The dining room downstairs in that hotel was one of the few places where a meal could be ordered, unless someone was tired of the unchanging menu. A hamburger and soft ice cream joint three blocks away appealed to teenagers.

A lot of the homes dated back to the American Civil War and before. Not much building went on now, except for someone who’d worked in the city and wanted to return to childhood roots. A banker and two insurance salesmen doubled as real estate agents. Someone working at real estate full-time would’ve starved.

Tradition related that U.S. Grant once spent a week visiting a local businessman in Pisgah. A certain Mr. Stoneman owned a prosperous emporium in town and a large farm where he bred cattle and horses. His farming operation was extensive, and the land contained a hunting preserve. Grant loved to sit on the veranda of the main house, smoke cigars, and gaze out over the lake on the farm while he and Mr. Stoneman discussed everything from politics to government to foreign trade.

More exciting was the legend of the stranded silent film hero who had passed through in the area in the 1920s. He had gotten his Model T bogged down in rain soaked mud roads one spring and had slogged his way to a nearby house. The only one home was the family’s teenage daughter. Her parents had gotten stranded in town by the same muddy roads. The weather didn’t clear for three days. Years later, there had been a handsome farmer living in the area who had no known father, but who bore a striking resemblance to the stranded movie idol. The handsome farmer never married, but he was never lonely. And he left a lot of offspring who also had borne a striking resemblance to the movie idol that many said had once been stranded in their area.

On one of his railroad campaigns for President, Franklin Delano Roosevelt had stopped at a siding not five miles from town to address a large gathering. Roosevelt had pronounced the countryside ‘beautiful to the eye and eloquent to the soul.’

The important thing about the famous people who visited was that they had kept moving on. Nobody stayed, not even the local people. And now only scattered houses were occupied. Few of them contained whole families. Generally, it was just remnants of larger families who stubbornly clung to the old home.

The Dalton home two blocks off Main was a prime example of former grandeur now gone to seed. The home had once been a showplace. An architect from New York City had come all the way down from New York City to design it, and gangs of black slaves had built it. Summer cotillions were once held in the large dining room. Now a livery stable that had been converted into a sagging barn huddled in back and was slowly settling its way back down into the earth. A few dusty hollyhocks tangled in gooseberry bushes stood where a lush kitchen garden had once flourished. Thoroughbred horses once pawed at the hitching post in front of the house, but no more.

In the 1880s, son and heir Andrew Dalton moved his family and his inherited wealth into Athens and
left the home in Pisgah to the younger, less ambitious son. Henry Dalton started the family tradition of letting the place go take care of itself, but he also gave his descendants the ability to scratch out a living and to hang on to what they had. They were survivors and continued to prove it. Sadly, they also did not have the ambition and brilliance of Andrew’s family. And, they continued to prove that fact.

But the Dalton old home place weathered the evolution of the passing years. The big, old, white house was sturdy and plain and had nurtured many generations of sturdy, plain unimaginative people. But the remnants of the family blood lines were running thin. Similarly, the house was quietly falling into disrepair in hidden, secret places where human eyes rarely looked. Like the family itself, the house hid rot under the eaves, deep in the joists, and concealed in its very foundations.

The rooms of the house were large and square. Gone were the days of the summer cotillions with its bright, chatty debutantes and its gallant soldiers romancing the young ladies. But the house had a faded, generally unappreciated dignity of its own. Sunlight poured through immense windows, and balmy afternoon breezes whispered through the white ninon curtains. Uninteresting wall paper with light gray or beige monotone patterns covered the walls. The woodwork were enameled white. Heavy, squat, dark pieces of furniture brooded in corners where they’d ruled for generations. Great-Aunt Lillie’s hand-embroidered table linens were likely to be stored beside everyday plastic place mats in the dining room chest. It wasn’t a very pretty house; in fact, some might say the rooms were downright ugly. But the people living there were used to the house, and to them it was home.

A young girl in her mid-teens sat in the kitchen watching an older woman putting an apple pie together. The girl had vacant, watery blue eyes and was fascinated with the older woman’s quick hands. The girl had even put aside her movie magazine to watch, and that was unusual behavior for the young dreamer who pictured herself in Hollywood and away from southeastern Ohio.

The older woman slipped the pie into the oven and dusted her hands on her apron.

“I just love to watch you do that,” the girl said.

The older woman pinched her lips together. “You should be learning to do that yourself, instead of watching me all the time.”

“Oh, I could never be as good as you are at baking, Granny.”

“Just takes practice, that’s all.” The older woman busied herself with cleaning up her baking mess. She shook her head. The addled pated child didn’t have sense to pitch in and help without being told.

Mary Grace Dalton watched her grandmother work and let her mind wander back over the generations who’d lived in this old house. There were times she could feel their presence, but she knew that they were merely curious and meant her no harm. Or maybe they were just repeating the routines of their lives and had no idea that they had passed or that a descendant was aware of their comings and goings. But the girl was curious about them and about their lives. Their loves and even their struggles and sorrows seemed so romantic to her. She loved to hear her grandmother talk about family history, but it was difficult keeping it in her head. There had been so many people who had lived before her!

“Granny, tell me again how we’re related to the famous Dalton gang.’

Gracie Dalton, for whom Mary Grace was named, bristled in indignation and her eyes snapped blue fire. “For starters, girl, Grannie Dalton is that old woman up at the rest home, the one who thinks Scarlett O’Hara is her roommate! I’m your grandma and Granny is your great-grandma. Why, I’m barely out of my thirties.” Truth was, she’d never see forty-eight again, but this dreamy-eyed
grandchild of hers didn’t need to know that fact.

Gracie poured herself a glass of brewed sweet tea that had been properly iced and sat in the huge walnut rocker that seemed to engulf her. She settled her head back and recited the Dalton litany with relish. She enjoyed the story herself and it seemed to soothe the child, strange child that she was. A fairy child, perhaps. If that was true, about the fairy child business and all, it sure would help explain a lot. But back to the family begats, just like the Old Testament.

“Eben Dalton was a third cousin, twice removed, from the terrible Dalton Brothers who were just as bad at robbing as the notorious Jesse James, although maybe not as famous. Eben was so ashamed of their escapades and being associated with them that he took his Bible and moved back here to Southeastern Ohio from Illinois so nobody would know he was kin to them. Most folks were moving West at that time, so Eben was able to get a lot of land dirt cheap. Of course, it never has raised much, except kids.” She raised her head for the expected laugh her husband had always gotten from that line. When none came from Mary Grace, her grandmother pursed her lips and reprimanded herself for expecting the girl to be quick enough to understand a good joke when it was told. The girl just didn’t seem to have the sense that God gave a wooden post. And Gracie had probably just insulted the post.

Mary Grace thought for a few moments and Gracie wondered what the girl would say next. The wanderings of her mind rarely disappointed her grandmother. It was one of the few compensations for taking care of the girl who saw life so differently than other people. Mary Grace seemed to see only the simple and good in the world. She was an elf child and had to be humored. Gracie rocked and sipped.

“How come you and my papa have the same last name if you’re my mama’s mother?”

Gracie sighed. Couldn’t that child keep a thing in her head? “Because your daddy’s pap and my husband, your grandpa, were second cousins. Your ma and pa are blood related, but not enough to be illegal.” Sometimes Gracie wondered if Mary Grace’s parents should’ve ever had children. Gracie was sure there was more intermarriage on the family tree. Nobody had ever quite figured out all the tracings of Andrew Dalton’s children. Why, Andrew was even credited with fathering several woods colts, so just marrying someone with a different last name didn’t always guarantee fresh blood.

Mary Grace was sure a good argument for the gene pool being deepened. That child could sure act addle pated at times. And look at the girl’s brother Christof. As a toddler, that child had always been caught eating dirt and chicken poop out in the backyard until Mary Grace’s pa had stuck him in that home up in Columbus.

Mary Grace was drawing circles on the kitchen table with the beaded water left by her frosty glass of sweet tea. Gracie wondered what would come out of her mouth next.

“When’s Wendalea coming home, Granny?”

“She won’t be, leastwise, not to stay. She and her man got good jobs up in Indianapolis now. They can’t leave them for too long if they want to keep them.”

Mary Grace pursed her lips with displeasure. “I miss her. I wish she’d come back and take me out riding with her friends again.”

Gracie snorted. “That’s not likely to happen. Your big sister owes her time to Delmar now. She’s through riding around with other boys.”

“But it was fun! They bought us soda pop and everything!”
“No reason why you can’t ride around with the boys. You’re old enough.”

“I don’t like it when they try to touch me. Wendalea made them stop, but I could tell she liked when the boys tried to do that. Those boys always seemed to want to try to touch us.”

“But that’s how the boys have fun. That’s why they buy you soda pop. Someday, you’ll have a husband. And then, you’ll have to let him touch you. As much as he likes.” She frowned, hoping the girl would understand what she was saying. “Wherever he likes.”

“I know, but I still won’t like it.”

“You’ll change your mind, mark my words. But there’s things that only folks married to each other have the right to do together. Mind you wait to your wedding night to do them, too.”

“What things, Granny?”

Gracie sighed. “We talked about all of this before. Don’t you remember?”

“Not all of it, Granny.”

“Well, never you mind then. Your husband will teach you all about it. And let no one else do any more than steal a little kiss from you in the meantime. Understand?!”

It was Mary Grace’s turn to sigh. “Yes, ma’am.”

Gracie started rocking again. “Until then, you got to get the fellahs interested in you. Seems like that nice Andy Pervis is sweet on you.”

“Oh, Granny, he’s almost ten years older than me!”

“Nothing wrong with that. He’s served in the Army and seen the world. He’s sowed his wild oats and is ready to settle down now.”

“Yeah. Right on top of Ida Lou Mayfield.”

“That tramp?! She probably would set her cap for him. She needs to give young Jacie a last name that’s different from the one she grew up with. Jacie’s going on four now and has been asking about his daddy, most likely. He can see how other children have daddies that live right with them and all.” She straightened her shoulders. “Jacie probably wonders how come he has so many uncles that come calling. I swear, Ida Lou should put a revolving door on her house.”

“Granny, how come men are like that?”

“Like what, child?” she asked, although she could pretty well guess what Mary Grace wanted to know.

“How come they visit so many young ladies? How come they don’t stay home?”

Gracie pressed her lips together. “Women have been asking that question for years.” She relaxed. “Men have certain needs. It’s natural for them to flit from flower to flower tasting the different honey available.”

“Sowing their wild oats?”

How many phrases we have for men being unfaithful, Gracie thought. And most of the time, we tolerate what they do. But if a woman like Ida Lou does the same thing, she’s called all kinds of bad
names. Hadn’t Gracie been using those bad names herself when she talked about Ida Lou.

“Exactly. Sowing wild oats.”

A knock sounded on the front door, and Gracie glanced at the wall clock as she pulled herself out of her rocker and patted her hair. “Must be Floyd Ellis with the mail. He’s right on time.”

Gracie crossed the dining room and living room, opened the heavy oaken front door, and smiled at a man with sparse hair. He stood not much taller than Gracie.

Floyd winked. “Hi, Gracie, my love. Ready to go to Florida with me?”

“Hush, you old fool! Someone will hear.”

“Ain’t nobody around except your granddaughter, and she’s too simple to know what’s going on.”

“She’s got the stirrings, though.”

His eyes sparkled. “Maybe I asked the wrong Dalton girl to go with me. Now, before you get all ruffled, I know when I’m well off. Who wants young stuff when there’s a willing and experienced woman around to cure what ails me?”

She blustered, but reddened like a school girl, too. “How long before you know for sure about Florida?”

“Just a few days, babe. My brother’s got the caretaker’s job nearly sewed up for me. As soon as I know, I’ll resign from the Post Office. Then I’m Florida bound. Sure hope I don’t have to go alone. What do you know for sure?”

“Nothing,” she hissed. “I haven’t heard from my daughter yet.”

Floyd pulled a package from his sack. “Reckon this might interest you.”

Gracie grabbed the package. “It’s from Trina, all right. Must be a birthday present for Mary Grace. She’ll be fifteen in a few days.”

“She doesn’t look that old. Family trait?” he asked with a mischievous grin.

“Never you mind. Is there a letter, too?”

“Don’t see none. Maybe she tucked a note inside the package.”

“Well, reckon I can wait a few days.”

“Think she’ll take Mary Grace?”

“Hard telling. She doesn’t like to remind her new man that’s she’s got children nearly grown. Guess she’s never told him about Wendalea.”

Floyd squeezed her arm. “The women in your family must marry awfully young.”

Gracie brushed his hand aside. “Go on with you now, or there’ll be no need for you to resign. You’ll get fired for loitering.”

He grinned. “I love it when you act all coy with me.” Then he sobered. “You do want to go with me, don’t you, Gracie?”
She stared into his eyes and a grin tugged on her lips. “No.”

His eyes sparkled, too. “That’s what I figured. Me, neither.”

If they’d allowed themselves, they would’ve giggled like a couple of teenagers.

Mary Grace looked up from her movie magazine as Granny walked back into the kitchen. “Did Mr. Ellis bring anything good, Granny?”

“This package is from your mama. She sent it all the way from Massachusetts for your birthday.”

Mary Grace’s eyes glowed as she turned the small package around in her hands. “What do you reckon it is?”

“We can only find out by opening it.”

Mary Grace set the package firmly away. “Can’t yet, I reckon. My birthday isn’t for three days. I’ve been watching the calendar.”

So much for hearing what was in Trina’s letter. Like a child, Mary Grace was a stickler for rules. She might be simple-minded, but she did follow rules. The only thing she had trouble with was calling Gracie ‘Granny.’ Gracie supposed it really wasn’t all that bad. At least she had a grandchild close enough to call her anything. Wendalea had a new life away from here, and Christof had enough trouble keeping straight who he was, let alone anyone else.

Three days later, the birthday present was opened to mixed reactions. Trina had sent a dainty bracelet of pearls amid gold links. A tiny golden heart dangled from one link. Mary Grace was fascinated with the trinket, but Gracie knew it wouldn’t wear long. Trina probably had found it in a dime store somewhere and been fascinated by it. Likely as not, she had bought one for herself.

Mary Grace opened the single sheet of paper, and Gracie read over her shoulder.

‘My darling Mary Grace,

Happy birthday! It’s difficult to imagine that my baby is almost grown up! If I didn’t have Baby Walter to remind me that I’m still young, I swear I’d feel like an old woman!

Your grandmother writes that since you are getting to be such a young lady, you need to spend some time with me. I don’t know what I could teach you that she couldn’t. After all, she was the one who taught me. But if you really want to come up here, I guess it would be all right. There’s a room up in the back part of the house that could be converted into a bedroom, I suppose. I’d have to have Ray take all of those old machinery parts out of there, though, and he’s been laid up some with back problems. It might be a little chilly up there, too. Massachusetts winters sure can be cold! And you’d have to walk half a mile to catch a school bus. Guess you’d need a warm winter coat and boots. I hope we can afford expenses like that on our budget. I’ve had to work some since Ray’s been laid up with his back. You could babysit with Baby Walter so I could work more. That way you could earn your keep and help pay for the coat and boots.

It’s too bad daddies aren’t expected to help raise their children. James Henry always could weasel out of his responsibilities. When I was a girl, I thought he was charming with that easy smile of his. Never fall for a charming man, Mary Grace. They not only can break your heart, they can disillusion you.
Let me know when to expect you and I can meet the bus. Sure hope you don’t pack any germs up to Baby Walter. He seems to catch anything that comes around.

Mama’

Gracie straightened up. “She isn’t exactly excited about your living with her, is she?”

Mary Grace folded the letter. She had enough wits about her to realize that the trip to Massachusetts was originally Granny’s idea. The girl was disappointed, but knew that Granny was probably tiring of her. Besides, Trina should be raising her, not Granny. But the greatest sting of disappointment was that Trina didn’t want her, either.

And Gracie’s heart wasn’t so hard that she didn’t realize Mary Grace’s disappointment. Gracie felt sorry for the girl.

“She didn’t mean that letter the way it sounded, honey. Maybe she had a touch of what was ailing the baby. And she’s probably tired from working extra. Why, you could be a real blessing to her. It would give you two a chance to know each other, also. It might get to be real homey for you up there.” Gracie knew the words rang with insincerity, and she felt guilty for being so selfish. But didn’t she owe something to herself? In a few years Mary Grace would be grown and gone, anyway. And Floyd would be long moved to Florida and not waiting for Gracie. He might be her last chance for happiness. Ticking clocks measure women’s chances for a lot of things, not only for having babies.

And, to put it bluntly, Granny just didn’t want to be responsible for Mary Grace anymore. Maybe Gracie was simply getting old and tired. She’d done a lot for Mary Grace, and the girl should be gracious enough to move on.

Mary Grace smiled wistfully. “It’ll be okay, Granny. Why, I bet I’ll have all kinds of fun with Baby Walter.” She frowned. “I wonder why Mama named him ‘Walter?’”

“Hard telling. Must be one of them Yankee names. Oh, here. I almost forgot. Here’s a card from your daddy.”

Mary Grace nearly dove for the envelope. After her mother’s scathing letter, she was in need of some cheering words. “Oh, ain’t it pretty?” She showed Gracie the roses on the outside of the card. Her eyes flew over the contents on the inside. “Listen to this: ‘Carrie Beth and I ride horses every day down here on the ranch. Your new step-mama is a pearl without equal,’ as the poets say. Sure wish you were here so you could learn to love her as much as I do, but I don’t know if I could handle having two pretty women with me all the time. I’d have to fight off all the jealous men! Just think about your poor ol’ pappy having to do all that fighting all the time! Anyway, darlin’, happy birthday to you. Wish you were here. But since you can’t be, I’ll be thinking about you. Love, Papa.’ Oh, Granny, doesn’t he write a beautiful letter?” she asked with stars in her eyes and she hugged the card to her chest with both hands.

About as pretty as he can talk, Gracie thought. He still could hand out the same line of baloney that Trina had fallen for. Probably this Carrie Beth had been just as smitten by his easy charms. And he soothed his daughter by just a few quickly jotted down words. It was only after being with him awhile that people realized he had no firm foundation. He’d never grown up. But he didn’t need to. Charm would always see him through situations. Too bad he didn’t really mean his invitation to Mary Grace. She’d learn quickly that Texas could be chillier than Massachusetts, but in a different way. But there was no way to tell his adoring daughter that.

Mary Grace smiled softly as she stared into space and fingered the lady bug earrings in her pierced
ears. Papa had given them to her. He always said she was as cute as a bug’s ear and had given her the lady bug earrings to prove it. They were one of her proudest possessions.

How different was his letter over Mama’s! He sounded as if he’d welcome her presence, whereas she’d be in Mama’s road. And Texas would be warmer than Massachusetts. Mary Grace hated cold weather.

How far away was Texas, anyway?

The evening was especially warm for early spring, and Granny decided that they would walk to the camp meeting that was to be held in their Baptist Church. Gracie could hardly wait for the weather to stay warm, then the meetings would be conducted in a tent down by the riverside. Then, with a pang, she realized that she and Mary Grace would never see another revival in Pisgah. If all went well, she would be in Florida soon, and Mary Grace would be in Massachusetts. She squared her shoulders. Some sacrifices had to be made if progress was to be made.

Gravel crunched under their feet as they walked along the side of the road. The sun had set, and softly colored clouds wafted along the horizon. An unseen bird sang his evening song of joy over the afternoon shower that had sprinkled down the dust.

“Sure is pretty out tonight, Granny.”

Gracie grunted an answer that was more a monotone hum than any recognizable word. Her mind was on her upcoming change in her lifestyle. She’d always lived around Pisgah and leaving it, she was beginning to realize, would be quite traumatic.

“Look, Granny, the colored folks must be going to a camp meeting of their own.”

Jarred out of her reverie, Gracie could see the group approaching them on the other side of the road.

“Hush, child. And don’t let them see you looking at them.”

“Why, Granny? Will they hex us?”

“I don’t know. No reason to take any chances.”

“Have you ever asked one of them if they hex white folks?”

Gracie was properly horrified. “I don’t talk to Negrass! And I pray to Lord on High that you don’t, neither!”

“Are they bad folks, Granny?”

“There’s probably good ones among them. Most seem honest and God fearing people. We just don’t do no trucking with them.”

“Why?”

“Child, you do disappoint me at times! The Negrass got their place, and we got ours. Everything works better if everybody remembers that. Now, don’t dawdle. We don’t want to be late for meeting.”

They continued down the road and met a young black family going toward their own meeting. The two parties passed without seemingly seeing each other. Mary Grace dared a sly glance and caught
the eye of a little girl. She was about seven years old and her pigtails stuck straight out from her head. She grinned, exposing perfect, very white teeth. But her eyes were what was wonderful in her face. They were dark and crackled with warmth and humor. A friend, Mary Grace thought as she raised her hand to return the girl’s shy wave.

But the child’s young mother saw the exchange and wrenched her daughter away. What bothered Mary Grace the most was the look of horror on the mother’s face. Mary Grace wouldn’t hurt the child, and she wanted the mother to understand that. But the mother’s eyes glanced at her proud husband’s stiff back and at Gracie’s frozen forward stare. It wasn’t Mary Grace whom the mother feared.

The tension in the air gradually eased as they walked onward in silence. Mary Grace felt her grandmother had seen the exchange, too, but refused to acknowledge it. But Mary Grace could feel her disapproval.

As they trudged along, Mary Grace thought about the river used by both blacks and whites for baptism. Did the river know the racial background of someone seeking salvation in its waters? Or was it indifferent? Did the river realize the color of anyone it drowned? Or did it suck down equally on anyone, black or white, who swam carelessly into its swifter currents?

Mary Grace wanted to ask her grandmother about the river, but figured her grandmother would only say she was being sassy. Granny always said that when one of Mary Grace’s questions had no answer.

The Daltons walked into their small white frame church and were swallowed up by welcoming friends and soon separated.

A girl about Mary Grace’s age grabbed her arm and pulled her aside. “Oh, Mary Grace! It’s so exciting! I just heard!”

“Heard what, Fayrene?” Heard she was going to Massachusetts?

“Heard that Donny Bob Rong is sweet on you!” She shivered in her excitement. “Ain’t you proud?”

“Donny Bob? Donny Bob Rong?”

“Never mind that he ain’t the cutest boy in school or the smartest. I think you’d be interested if any boy liked you.” Fayrene looked thunderstruck. “I mean, oh, gosh, Mary Grace, I’m sorry!”

“I know what you mean, Fayrene. I’m not the cutest, or the smartest, either.”

“I didn’t meant to hurt you, Mary Grace.”

Mary Grace smiled and squeezed the girl’s arm. “I know. Thanks for telling me. If it’s true--”

“It’s true! He told my brother Leroy!”

“Then maybe I can help it along.”

Fayrene’s eyes shone. “You mean--”

“Yes.”

“A potion?”

“Yes.”
Fayrene leaned forward and whispered in Mary Grace’s ear. “A LOVE potion?”

Mary Grace nodded her head, and both girls giggled. They separated soon after that and Mary Grace went to look for her grandmother. On the way she spotted Donny Bob Rong who blushed to his shirt collar when he saw her. It was true.

Donny Bob Rong was no catch. None of his ancestors had been, either, as Granny often related, but they always managed to get married and start breeding. Maybe they just found somebody desperate enough to marry them. And Mary Grace was desperate. If she married Donny Bob, she wouldn’t have to leave Pisgah. Then she’d be out of everybody’s hair, except Donny Bob’s. And she reckoned she could be wife enough for him and provide him with backward children who would manage to marry eventually. And the terrible taunt would continue down through the years that Granny remembered from her childhood: Is that boy right for you, girl? No, he’s Rong, but I’ll marry him anyway!

Granny might be embarrassed by Mary Grace’s husband, but she would accept him. The Rongs were hard working farmers, but lacked imagination and social graces. Life with them would be boring, but secure.

Meeting started, and Mary Grace slid into the pew beside Granny. A guest minister was scheduled to appear, and he preached fire and brimstone. He was young and good-looking in a round faced, stocky way. Mary Grace began to dream about him as her beau, then awoke and told herself how sinful she was. After all, he was a man of God and above all of those corrupt cravings of the carnal flesh of man’s frail body.

He asked for sinners to come forward and confess. A few straggled forward and came back bawling and praising the revivalist.

Suddenly, he pointed at Mary Grace and bid her to come forward. She stared at Granny who nodded for her to do as she was told. By now, the congregation was on fire. Mary Grace floated forward on a wave of prayer.

Her eyes were bugged and her heart was pounding as she stopped in front of the evangelist. Sweat was running into the creases of flesh in his neck, but his eyes were on fire with his holy mission.

And not so holy. He’s seen the young girl halfway back sitting on the aisle. She had pale hair, pale eyes, and a slight body. A sacrificial lamb. Just the way he liked them. Young and scared. And virgin. And this girl seemed flushed and alive with an inner fire. Probably already had sex on her mind and was curious and eager as hell for a man to introduce her into the world of adult pleasures.

He spun Mary Grace around to face the congregation. He held her shoulder tightly and yelled, “Lord, we have a sinner among us!”

“Hallelujah!” roared the congregation.

“A ripe, young sinner!” he informed them.

“Save her, Lord!” someone begged.

Mary Grace’s eyes widened further. People were in a frenzy. She saw her grandmother waving her arms above her head. Were they insane? What sin did she have?

“Born in sin, wicked sin!” the minister informed the incensed congregation.

Oh, okay. She had been born in sin. That was sure enough true. The Bible said so, and this minister
confirmed that fact.

“Poor child! Cursed to damnation!” the minister yelled.

“Wicked sin!”

“Save her, Lord!”

Born in sin? Wait! She remembered. Her parents had been legally married. Hell, they already had Wendalea! What did this stranger know? She was legal. She turned to object, but he shoved her back around to face the writhing audience.

“Save her, Jesus!” he cried.

“Save her, Jesus!” came the response.

Often had she sat in revival while some repentant came forward. Now she knew how embarrassing it was, and she hadn’t even volunteered.

All she wanted was to get away from the front of the church, but the minister’s hand had a firm grip on her shoulder. His words and their responses began to whirl around her head, and she knew she was going to faint.

Then she became aware of something else. The minister’s hand not gripping her shoulder was groping her buttocks. A rush of cold air around her legs told her he had reached his hand up under her clothing. She wore a full skirt. Perhaps that was one reason he’d chosen her. And with the robe he was wearing, there was so much material that not even the choir members were aware of his forbidden activity.

Mary Grace blushed redder as she felt his fingers trail between her legs. She jumped forward and gasped as he painfully pinched the soft flesh of her inner thigh. She screamed, but the congregation thought the blush and the scream meant she was feeling the power of the Lord. Actually, she was feeling the abuse of one of His lesser servants. But the young minister had no fear of being discovered. He could probably spank her bare-assed naked and no one in the frenzied crowd would stop him.

His fingers fumbled inside her panties and hooked on the strip of cloth covering the crouch. The top of his fingers tickled her pussy as they rested against her wiry thatch. If he’d had any questions before, he now knew that she was past puberty and mature enough to have a man’s hands exploring her body.

“Jesus!” he yelled, lurching forward and ripping the panties in two as he bent. He forced her to squat while he pronounced a long prayer over her. Meanwhile, his fingers defiled her innocence as they probed and pinched her flesh. He pushed down heavily on her shoulder as one of his fingers sliced neatly into her warm body and squirmed around. Mary Grace sighed deeply and shook with a convulsion, but her attacker smiled. She was a virgin, after all. One meaty finger of his was all she could take, but he longed to plunge his broad middle finger inside her, also.

Mary Grace hung her head in humiliation. Tears dripped off her chin and she shuddered in passion and shame. She was in the center of a world gone mad.

One finger of his had been bored inside her and left the others to torment her love button. She understood its purpose well. She’d often touched herself there when she wanted to feel good. And now he was, was--
Mary Grace threw her head back on his shoulder and dropped her mouth open in joy. She hated him for discovering her secret and wished him dead. Then she wished the hand on her shoulder would drop down and massage her aching breast.

Like a wish granted, she felt his hand brush her breast and realized she was facing him. Somehow, at sometime, he had deftly disconnected his unseen hand and rearranged their clothing. He must’ve had plenty of practice in his maneuvers since he did it so smoothly. His victims were probably like her: young and innocent and sure to die of embarrassment if anyone found out. No one would accuse him. Who would believe that an evangelist would be so evil? They were forgetting one important fact about the saintly evangelist. Beneath his religious garments, he was still a man.

Mary Grace’s body was still on fire. She ached with the need for release of what he had awakened inside her. He must’ve known that he hadn’t sated the sensations he’d stirred up. Her eyes felt as if hot cinders inflamed them, and her warm breath rasped through dry, slightly parted lips.

He smiled down at her. The bastard knew what a state he’d left her in. But he wasn’t through with her yet. That came as both good and bad news to Mary Grace.

“‘Heal her, Lord!’” he yelled and shoved her to her knees. Stunned, she went down and realized too late that her face was in line with his crouch. She glanced up and he shoved her head against him. “Heal her, Lord! Stun her, Lord! Lift her, Lord! Glory be! Glory be!” With each three syllable prayer, he thrust her face into his groin. He spread his legs, and she could smell the sweat and maleness of his body. “Lord God in Heaven!” he yelled and twisted her face against his body. She struggled for breath, well aware that her movements pleasured him. “Lord in Heaven! Lord in Heaven! Lord, he-e-eal! He-e-eal! Oh, Lord. Oh, Lord,” he said slower. “Oh, sweet Jesus, our own. Our own.” He rubbed his hand in his face, then with a smile shoved it into her face. His hand smelled of her own crouch.

A blaze of red enveloped her whole body.

He helped her rise to her feet. She was sluggish from her need for release and for the humiliation of what she’d just endured. Sweat was pouring down his spent face.

“What is your name, sister?”

“Mary Grace,” she whispered, clutching his hand.

“Jesus loves you, Mary Grace,” he said softly, earnestly.

“I know.”

“And I love you, child.”

She lowered her head. What a hypocrite!

“I will give you the true kiss of Christian love that you deserve.”

She looked up questioningly into his smile. He swept her into his arms and kissed her deeply on the lips. It was the kind of adult kiss that a man gives to a woman who has pleasured him well.

“Praise Jesus!” he yelled.

“Praise Jesus!” the congregation hollered back.

He gave her a tender smile as she clung to him. “She is saved for Jesus now.”
“Praise Jesus!”

He kissed her again to the roars of the crowd. Then she felt his hand under the front of her skirt. Then that brutal finger was scouring her love button. It happened so quickly that she couldn’t scream, only gasp in pleasure. He relieved her tension and she whimpered against his mouth. Her lips fluttered as passion shook her body, and she saw the triumph in his eyes as he held onto her.

When he released her a few moments later, she was smiling. Now she understood why nobody had ever told on him. He never disappointed them. They walked away from the pulpit feeling blessed. And whether it was from a religious experience or merely a sexual one was for the recipient to determine.

Mary Grace knew how she felt. The minister had taught her a powerful lesson. Religion and sex would forever be entwined together for her.

“Seemed like an odd way to conduct a revival, if you asked me,” Gracie complained on their way home by moonlight. “Still, he gets the job done. Do you feel like you were saved?”

Mary Grace grinned at the double meaning. “Oh, indeed. He’s a man who gets his job done, all right, Granny.” Already, she was thinking, and acting, like a woman with knowledge.

The next morning Mary Grace sat staring into her glass of milk at the breakfast table. Had the evangelist violated her or simply abused her? Had he corrupted her and made her worldly? She wished she could ask Granny, but Granny would probably only wash her mouth out with lye soap and give her a bare-butt spanking. Neither punishment would change what had happened to her. Was she still a maiden? A man had touched her in unmentionable places and ways, but she didn’t feel dirty. In fact, she felt rather pleased with the experience and with the fact that she had a man, and a man of God, at that. While her public deflowering was happening, she thought she’d die of actual embarrassment. But the minister had convinced her that he was bringing her to Jesus. What a wonderful way to be saved! Pricked for Jesus!

She had been privileged to have been felt up by a Divine Finger. The experience had nothing to do with mundane sex since the evangelist was merely an instrument of God. Why Mary Grace had been chosen for this unique gift would eventually be revealed to her. In the meantime, she was taking steps to attract Donny Bob Rong.

Early this morning she had written his name on a piece of paper, shredded it, and brewed it with strong tea. The charm might’ve worked better if she’d had his picture to shred instead of just his name, but she took up the slack in personal attraction. She would start to woo him this very afternoon. She knew which field he’d be working in--

“Cat got your tongue?” Granny asked as she placed her cup in its saucer.

Even the damn dishes had mates! It was high time that Mary Grace did, too.

“W-what?”

“Did that preacher cure you of talking, too?”

“No, ma’am. I’m just thinking.”

“Good thoughts, I hope.”
They sound good to me, she agreed. “Yes, ma’am.”

Mary Grace felt more alert this morning, as if the world seemed less puzzling to her. The evangelist hadn’t known she was considered to be simple minded, so he hadn’t treated her simple minded. He had awakened more than her body last night. True, there were places in her brain that still slumbered. Some places would always slumber, no matter how much experience of life she received. But some of the fog had lifted, and she was more aware of her surroundings.

“Better hurry now, or you’ll be late for school.”

“Sure, ma’am.” Tonight, after school, she’d take the long way home past the field where Donny Bob Ron would be working. “Oh, I might be a little late this evening, so don’t worry about me.”

“Okay. Got some after school activity planned?”

Mary Grace nearly burst out loud with laughter at the double meaning of the words. As it was, she could barely keep the grin off her face.

“Yes, ma’am,” she answered her grandmother. “You might say that.”

After Mary Grace left, Gracie realized she hadn’t asked where she’d be after school. But the girl acted differently today as if the revival had really changed her. She acted mature and grown up, all of a sudden. The evangelist had done that. Mary Grace had been saved for Jesus, and Gracie was thankful for that.

Donny Bob Ron had turned eighteen last fall and thought it was high time he was marrying. That Mary Grace Dalton seemed interested, but she sure was skinny. He’d always hankered after some female built sturdy like his ma. Maybe Mary Grace would grow into it with childbearing.

Donny Bob watched the furrows his tractor had turned on his last round through the field. Fat slabs of soil had exposed squirming grubs and snarled roots of several years’ grasses. Pa had decided to bust out this parcel for spring planting this year, and Donny Bob loved to bring the ground into its own promise.

He frowned as he thought he saw a flash of color at the edge of the woods. What was that? No animal was that combination of blue and white. Then he grinned as he recognized a girl’s skirt. And he also saw that the girl wearing the skirt was Mary Grace Dalton. She’d gone out of her way to hunt him up. She must be hot for him.

Donny Bob drove to the trees, shut off the tractor, and climbed down. Grinning, he walked to where Mary Grace stood. Sure was warm for this early in the year. He’d been sweating and probably smelled like a boar hog. His older brother Jace said girls liked strong body odor. It meant guys were hard workers and masculine. It also meant that they were prime breeding stock, much like pa’s duroc hogs.

His grin widened and he showed her his broken, uneven teeth. “Howdy, Mary Grace. School over for the day?” He lifted his arm to rub the back of his head so she could get the full benefit of his underarm aroma.

Mary Grace turned aside her head. Donny Bob stunk. That preacher last night had smelled pretty, and his teeth had been even, too.

Donny Bob stepped chosen and chucked her under the chin. “Cat got your tongue, little sugar?”
She didn’t like him to touch her. She turned aside. “Don’t--”

“Why not? Thought you wanted to be my girl.”

“Maybe. Depends.”

“Depends? On what?”

“How courtly you can be.”

“Don’t know nothing about being courtly. I do know what girls like, though.”

He made a grab for her and she tried to fend him off. His hands were rough and awkward and not a thing like the preacher’s had been on her tender flesh. What if Donny bob wanted to touch her THERE, the way the preacher had? Mary Grace fought harder. She couldn’t allow Donny Bob to put his crude hands on her.

“Don’t, Donny Bob!”

“Come on, honey. Be friendly.”

“I said, don’t!” She pushed him aside.

“Then why did you show up here today? Why do you girls flirt with a guy if you don’t want to pay up?”

Donny Bob had hit on one of the world’s great puzzles. Maybe he wasn’t so stupid, after all.

“I heard, you might like me,” she said.

“You might’ve heard right.”

“I thought you might want to court me.”

“Could be.”

“That, that you might want us to get serious.”

“I don’t know about us getting serious, not quite yet. He grinned. “What I really thought was that I might want to try you out. We could step into the woods and find out.”

Mary Grace wasn’t prone to anger. She took a lot of shoving to keep from arguing. She hated to lose her temper, because when she got mad, she got mad all over. She feared that this was going to be one of those times.

“What kind of person do you think I am?!”

“Huh?”

“I resent what you want me to do!”

Donny Bob had never seen her angry. This was a whole new person, and he was stunned by her intense emotion. “Then why--”

“I told you!” She was near tears now. “I thought we could make promises to each other! I thought you could come calling!”
“Sure, all that, too. But first--”

She tried to keep her voice low as he eyes bored into his. “I could scratch your eyes out! You are hateful to me!”

“And you’re a tease. And I’m going to make sure that everyone knows that you’re nothing but a tease.”

“I am not!” She nearly lost her hold on herself, and she breathed deeply for control. Then she said something that was true inspiration. “You tell anyone I was out here with you, and I’ll tell them you couldn’t satisfy me.”

‘Huh?’

“Just think what that will do to your reputation as a stud!”

“You wouldn’t!”

“Oh, yes, I would. You’re hateful, Donny Bob Rong! And you’re all wrong, for me!” She spun around and stormed off.

He stared after her, wondering where he’d lost control of the situation. He’d heard that most girls liked visits into the woods. Perhaps Sally Margaret Jones would be more willing, and she had more meat on her ass. There would be a lot more of her to hang onto.

With thoughts of future woodland excursions, he returned to his plowing.

“You’re not eating your rabbit stew,” Gracie remonstrated. "And Floyd brought us that rabbit special. He shot it himself."

Mary Grace sighed. “I’m guess not too hungry, Granny.”

“Humph! Spring fever, and it isn’t even spring, as the poets say. Better eat anyway. You’re still a growing girl.”

Mary Grace obediently shoveled stew into her mouth. It was awfully difficult being Granny’s little girl after knowing what she had learned about men and their weakness for women’s flesh. One man had touched her and another man had wanted to touch her, and she felt very worldly and wanton. But the knowledge also saddened her. She wanted to go back to her childish notions that men were gentlemanly and courtly.

Papa had always been nice. Men were supposed to act like he did. He lived in Texas which was part of the Old South. Mary Grace had read that Southern gentlemen were very courtly. Perhaps, if she went down to Texas, she could find one of those men. Massachusetts, where Mama was, was further north. The men must really be curt and short-tempered up that way.

Besides, Mama didn’t want her, and Papa did. She’d tried to get Donny Bob to court her. That would’ve been her one chance of staying in Pisgah. Now she’d have to leave town so Granny could have her own life in Florida with Floyd.

How complicated it all was! How much simpler Life had been when she could walk quietly through
the woods and study Nature. And what had been the best part of her woodland walks was when she had come across the Fairy Gifts.

They weren’t always there and they weren’t always obvious, but they must’ve been left by fairies. Who else could’ve done it? Once she found a three-legged plastic piece that looked like a table for a doll’s house. She’d taken it home joyfully and added it to the acorn cup dishes in her cupboard.

The next time there’d been a seashell with a star in it. How could such an object get clear up here in Ohio? She’d heard that once, years and years before any man had lived here, an ocean had lain over this land. More incredibly yet, she’d heard that the Appalachians hadn’t even existed then. That fact couldn’t be true. Someone was teasing her. Surely, the mountains had always been here. Still, there lay the beautiful shell in her hand. It was a wonder indeed. She took it home and kept it.

What nagged at her was the tragedies that’d occurred shortly after finding the fairies’ gifts. She found the plastic table and her parents had divorced. She discovered the shell by the riverbank, and two weeks later Granny’s sister Leona had died. Now, today, as she was walking away from Donny Bob, she’d found the beautiful rock.

It was a geode split open to show its crystals hidden inside its plain exterior, but Mary Grace wouldn’t have known to call it that. She just saw the ugly shell and the loveliness it had kept secret, now exposed for all the world to see.

Was the rock actually her? Had Donny Bob been meant to have her? Would something bad happen to him if she turned her back on him and not let him discover all of her loveliness inside?

Would something terrible happen if she took the sparkling rock from its forest home? Was it a gift from the fairies, or was she stealing it from them? Was it her destiny to take the rock? Would she be cursed if she took it?

She snatched it up, looked quickly around, and fled. What was that sound that chased her? Was it high-pitched laughter from the fairies hidden behind the trees? Or was it simply the small brook gurgling nearby over submerged rocks as it raced on its path to the Ohio River?

Later she devised the plan of the letter switch. Had the rock given her knowledge, or were the fairies getting their revenge? Whichever, it was a good plan, whether she’d thought of it or they. Now to see if she could pull it off.

Knowledge of the world had given her cunning. She could see now that Granny wanted to be with Floyd Ellis, the mailman. If Granny’s eyes wouldn’t have been so blinded by love, she might’ve not been fooled by Mary Grace’s ruse. But Gracie made it almost too easy for Mary Grace. Granny never suspected. Never before had Mary Grace been anything but simple minded. Why would the child be any different now?

Gracie and Floyd drove Mary Grace over to Chillicothe to catch the bus one fine day in early spring. Mary Grace sat in the back seat of Floyd’s old blue Chevy and watched the smiles and soft looks passing between the middle-aged couple in front. Was this what love really was? Movies gave a more exciting picture of it. Floyd wasn’t charging forth on a gallant steed to woo Granny. He was simply there to offer her companionship. And Granny seemed fairly starry eyed by his tactics.

Was Granny being swept off her feet by Floyd, or simply settling? Mary Grace would really like to be able to ask her grandmother some of these perplexing questions, woman to woman. But Mary Grace didn’t know how shockproof her grandmother was. And now wasn’t the time to draw too
much interest to herself.

Mary Grace knew that Granny was going away with Floyd. Florida had been mentioned in hushed tones. Wherever their destination might be, Mary Grace knew the home she and Granny had shared in Pisgah no longer existed. Sure, the house was still standing, but their home life was gone forever. Granny had a new family now in Floyd. Even if Mary Grace didn’t take the bus and simply returned to Pisgah, she couldn’t go back to the old house. Other people would be living in it soon, and she would have to stay with distant cousins until she was out of school. At least going to her papa would keep her with close kin.

Yes, she was going to her papa. Gracie didn’t know it and she still might figure it out, but Mary Grace had a good chance of succeeding with her plan. Granny might be too much in love to notice.

Mary Grace knew that Granny had sent a note to Papa in Texas saying that Mary Grace was going to live with her mother in Massachusetts. Gracie had also sent her daughter a note saying that Mary Grace was on her way. What Gracie didn’t know was that Mary Grace had sent her mother a letter a few days later saying plans had changed and that Mary Grace would go to Texas. Mama would’ve had a few days to stew about the addition to her family and how it would affect them. Getting Mary Grace’s letter would seem like a reprieve. Trina wouldn’t question it.

“You don’t have to wait until the bus leaves, Granny, I’ll be okay. Honest.”

Gracie looked around the bus terminal suspiciously. No one was paying them any attention, but a person couldn’t be too careful in the city.

“Seems like a mighty big place to leave a young girl, all by herself.”

“Don’t worry, Granny.”

Mary Grace got some unplanned help from Floyd. “She’ll be fine, Gracie. Women in your family mature early. Remember?” He risked an eyebrow coyly and was treated to a blush from his girlish sweetheart.

Floyd had certainly found a side to Granny that Mary Grace had never seen, but she didn’t have the luxury of pondering about it. She had to get Granny and Floyd to leave her alone.

“Well--” Gracie started.

“I’ll be okay, Granny. Honest, I will. This is the way things were meant to be.”

Granny was a great believe in Fate. Thank goodness, Mary Grace was, too!

“Well, okay,” Gracie conceded.

“Good!”

Floyd beamed his agreement.

But Granny was full of instructions as they approached the bus bound for Springfield, Massachusetts.

“If your mother doesn’t meet the bus, wait for her in the terminal. Under no circumstances are you to leave the building on your own.”
“Yes, ma’am.”

“And don’t talk to strangers. Under no circumstances—”

Mary Grace had the rural person’s fear of strangers. Gracie need not worry about that. “Yes, Granny. I won’t.”

They paused at the bus doors and studied each other with steady gazes. Granny brushed a wisp of hair from Mary Grace’s face. Sounds of other travelers hustling around the terminal came to them, but the two women stood in an island of quiet. They had lived together, alone, for many months. Both knew that time would never be repeated.

Finally, Granny nodded. “Yes, it will be all right. I can see it in your eyes that you’re do just fine. You know right from wrong, and it’s time to prove it.” Gracie had trouble saying anything further.

“Thanks for everything, Granny. I’ll always appreciate it.” She hugged Granny.

Gracie finally pushed her away. “Go on, get on the bus.”

‘You don’t have to watch until we leave, Granny. It'll be nearly ten minutes. You and Floyd go on. The bus driver is here to watch out for me.”

“Well—”

“The child is right, Gracie. Besides, we want to get back to Pisgah before dark.” His sparkling eyes said he had other matters on his mind. Perhaps Granny had told him about the sheets she’d washed in scented water and spread on her bed this morning.

“Well—”

Mary Grace jumped on the bus steps and waved. “Goodbye, Grandma!”

Gracie bit her lip. Mary Grace had finally remembered to call her ‘Grandma,’ but it sounded so formal as if the child was all grown up. Gracie missed hearing the familiar ‘Granny.’

Mary Grace found a seat by the window and waved again at Granny and Floyd.

Granny waved, wiped away a tear, and allowed herself to be pulled away by Floyd.

Mary Grace waited a few more moments, mumbled an excuse to the driver, hopped off the bus, and exchanged her ticket for one going to Houston, Texas. She settled back in her seat with a contended sigh. There would be a holdover in St. Louis (such a big city!), and then she’d be on her way to Papa.

As the bus crawled into traffic, Mary Grace glanced at the place where Floyd’s old blue Chevy had been parked. A red and gray van now occupied the spot. With a pang, Mary Grace realized that she really was on her own and that Granny really was gone from her life. A moment of panic was followed by the optimism of youth. A great adventure awaited her with Papa at the end of the journey. Wouldn’t he be surprised to see her!

Mary Grace hadn’t brought many clothes with her. She didn’t have much that would look decent outside Pisgah. But that didn’t matter. Papa would buy new clothes for her.

She did miss not having the fairy gifts, though. They weren’t going with her. The three-legged plastic chair was back under the tree where she’d found it near the fairy rings in Mr. Simpson’s
pasture. Some might say the circles of grass were mere curiosities, but Mary Grace knew the spots were where the fairies danced on moonlit nights. Now they had their wee table back to dine on.

The second gift, the rock with the starfish on it, had been returned to the bank of the rushing creek where Mary Grace had found it. And the third gift, the geode broken to show its crystals inside, now lay back near the creek in the woods where Donny Bob Rong had meant to initiate Mary Grace into adulthood. The gifts were back in their original settings. Perhaps someone else would find them and have better luck with them.

As the miles slipped away behind her, Mary Grace felt the control of her home environment gradually lose its hold on her. She had always heard about St. Louis and what a fabulous city it was. Even though it would be frightening to do, surely it wouldn’t hurt to take a look at some of its charm and mystery. She had promised Granny not to step outside the terminal in Springfield, Massachusetts. Not a word had been said about the terminal in St. Louis, Missouri. Of course, Granny hadn’t know that was an option.

Mary Grace knew she was shading the truth a little with a technicality, but she was eager to see the world. She could stow her valise in a locker, take a little walk outside the terminal, and be back to make her connections with the bus for Houston.

Mary Grace sighed again and leaned her head back in pleasure against the soft seat. Life was finally beginning for her. But she knew she would never forget the heritage of her childhood home. Nature would always offer a haven for her, even if its mysteries would make her shiver in awe.

Because there was more to this world than the scientists recognized. Poor, poor scientists! How deprived they were in their ignorance. For Mary Grace knew things they didn’t know. And as the bus carried her forward to her Destiny, Mary Grace smiled with her secret knowledge.

Fairies do live in the hollows. Magic does work. Potions can weave a mystic charm. Because the simple folk living in those hills back home believe. They believe.

And that’s all it’s ever taken for magic, or religion, to work.
Barbara, After

One winter, Miles Paxton Hughes rented a beach home near a little town along the California coast. The hamlet lay far north of San Francisco and seemed to appeal to the hermit in him. He’d been there working on a made-for-television movie and simply stayed on after the filming was over until spring. His role in the movie had been secondary, but solid. Miles had borrowed Sean Murphy’s philosophy that it was better to be a working actor than an unemployed star. Miles’ success in HARRINGTON-PRICE had not left him with the assured demand from Hollywood that he’d hoped for. Thank goodness he’d been able to see clearly enough past any ego he possessed. If he wanted to stay in Hollywood, he had to be an actor, not a star. The formula had worked for his idol, Sean Murphy. And Sean was seen perennially, on the large screen and small.

Miles stayed on in the tiny seaside town far north of San Francisco after the filming was over because the town suited his spirit at the time. California in winter can be a misty, foggy, melancholy affair, especially on the seacoast, especially in the northern part of the state. And Miles was feeling melancholy that year. The town and its setting came closest to being the ideal location he sought. But he knew he wouldn’t always be melancholy. Then this town would lose its perfection for him. He suspected that there was no ideal place to live. Any place would have its drawbacks. On the other hand, any place was livable. Because a person lived not only on a physical plane, but also on a mental one. And if a person was contented with his lot in life, then his body could be located just about anywhere for the person to know peace. Because peace came from within, not from outside the person.

Miles often took walks along the wind swept hills over the winter-savage ocean and thought about how this melancholy place not only suited but reflected his mood that winter. With hands plunged deeply into the vast pockets of an enveloping parka of olive drab color, he stalked along the barren cliffs and roamed among the unprotected boulders along the beach. He loved to feel the sting of the icy rain strike his face. No softness dwelt here, no second chances were offered, no mistakes left unpunished. There was an unforgiving challenge in this primitive place, and Miles could relate to that first cautious creature who’d ever climbed out of the primal ooze to face a brutal world. Society was a dim memory, and civilization hadn’t been created yet. He felt like a champion, simply by existing here. It was a clean, uncomplicated place with a threat to his well-being forever before him. This was not a place of rest.

Miles loved it.

Miles would stand on a rise of ground and turn his face into that biting, stinging, unforgiving wind. “Give me your best shot,” he dared the elements. “I’d hate you if you coddled me.” Maybe he shouldn’t mock the forces of Nature, he cautioned himself. After all, he was on Nature’s turf, not his. But he was warm in his parka and felt secure on the land.

But the power of the ocean had his respect, also. It made him tremble to know of the unconquerable savagery within his sight, but he was just beyond its reach of claiming him. How frustrated that must make the ocean! He was beyond the reach of its terror, beyond the reach of a power that couldn’t be fought, only avoided. But he never taunted the ocean. No. It still might devise a method to reach him.

Miles had to remind himself that the ocean was inanimate. It had no thoughts about him, one way or the other. Man likes to think he had control over his world. But always there should be something wild, something free left to inspire Man. If Man had no worlds to conquer or no questions to answer, Miles was certain that Man would go out and find some. But this ocean went on doing its duty year in, year out, obeying orders from the moon and the sun, oblivious to Man. Like the indifferent dead,
it could function quite well without Man. Perhaps that was what intrigued Miles that winter. He knew he was a hopeless romantic, and he could wallow in this melancholy as a drunkard in his bottle. In fact, there were times he felt like an alcoholic indulging in his whims and letting his appetites control him.

Miles would also stand on the crest of a small hill and watch Bruiser, his only companion that winter, frolic on the beach. A single call would bring the big, ugly beast galloping back to his side. Often Miles did that, just so he and the dog could share the joy of a reunion. But other times Miles let the Chesapeake retriever gambol in the chilling waves unmolested. Bruiser didn’t know it, but not even he could cheer his master. For the simple reason that Miles did not want to be cheered. He relished the loneliness and the melancholy. And, yes, the self-hatred. He wallowed in the world’s biggest pity party.

At those times, Miles longed for another companion: the mystery girl with whom he’d spent a platonic weekend so many years ago. He wanted to tell her that here, on this inhospitable coast, he’d found an ideal place to live, at least for these few winter months. He wanted to share this place with her. He was sure she’d understand his feelings, for he had sensed the inner core of loneliness that she fiercely protected in herself. She would allow someone only so close before she erected barriers. He longed to talk to her again and to explain to her what he’d learned about Life since they’d been together. Perhaps then he could organize his thoughts and would understand Life, himself. Maybe he could even help his mystery girl.

But, sometimes, as he stood over the ocean, watching Bruiser run through the waves and feeling the sting of ice laden salt spray strike his face, it was another girl who tore at his mind. Bambi Love, the rock-and-roll singer who had disappeared so mysteriously several years ago, had never been found. Wild and uncontrollable, she was as elusive as her song that haunted him. Unchained Melody. Its strains echoed through his mind even now. Poor, romantic him! He knew that girl was as unattainable as her haunting song.

But where was she? He felt that she still lived. And if she didn’t? How sad for all of them if she didn’t. Something, though, deep inside of him believed that she still lived. Somewhere, she ate and slept and loved. Somewhere. Somewhere, life was normal for her. Somewhere, wherever she was, she occasionally thought of him and that brief weekend when they had been so perfect together.

He hoped. He hoped she thought of him in passing, if only briefly. It would mean so much to him if she did.

Why didn’t she step forward and stop all of the wondering about her welfare? Why didn’t she put people’s hearts at ease? Didn’t she know that there were people who were concerned about her welfare? People who cared about her?

Miles longed to solve these mysteries in his life. He knew his soul was starved for answers. But he knew, also, that the reality might well ruin the pristine shrine he’d constructed around those two girls. He longed to know their fates, but he savored the haunting mystery surrounding them. Poor romantic him!

Miles knew that when the winter ended, he’d return to Los Angeles and seek work. He’d move into his rented beach home near Malibu and take Bruiser on more walks, but on a different beach. Bruiser didn’t mind which beach it was, just so it was a beach. Miles knew he would be better off adopting Bruiser’s philosophy: Accept what you have and take joy in it.

But, oh, this melancholy winter would stay with Miles! Hidden deeply in his heart, the memory would wait for him. And he would pine for his two lost loves, knowing that his feelings for them might well perish in the real, practical world. But he would savor all of that heartache, and he would
love the pain that it brought to him. Because pain was a part of love, too.

Poor, poor romantic him.

The shower of rain had passed, and a hint of the approaching autumn hung in the cooling air. A slight chill felt invigorating after weeks of oppressive summer heat; the world glowed in its newfound freshness. Nature was revived from her lassitude and offered rejuvenated scenes that just yesterday had been tired city streets. Birds sang briskly. Leaves sparkled and flashed with green fires, perhaps for the last time before frost caught them. The world was alive once more.

But the woman missed all the loveliness of the freshly washed day. She slogged down the sidewalk with her head lowered and her hands crammed into the pockets of her old trench coat. Mother Nature in all of her glory went not thanked by this ungrateful woman and, more outrageously, unnoticed.

Barbara Crider felt wistful and without anchor, and this lousy weather wasn’t helping very much. Soon autumn would be upon the land, and then the dreaded isolation of winter would descend. Years before, she’d savored the confinement to home and hearth as a time to read and contemplate. But this year, she sensed that the Pennsylvania winter would only smother and imprison her.

Barbara had graduated two springs before with a Bachelor of Arts degree and had taken a job at the college library. It was satisfying and stimulating work, and Barbara often toyed with the idea of going to graduate school and becoming a professional librarian. Then she could move on to a more challenging position in another city. She had an analytical mind and knew the work would suit her. And the boost in salary and prestige would be welcomed, also.

She still had no close friends, either male or female. Sex had lost its importance for her, and she was merely friendly with men. A widowed professor of philosophy had made nervous overtures to her at the library. She knew that with the slightest nod of encouragement from her, he would be hers. He wanted the security of a home again. He wanted a built in date for faculty teas and alumni weekends and, oh, so many functions that swirl around a campus life. His immense relief of having someone permanently on his arm would make him her grateful slave. She would be treasured. Life would be dull and safe.

And, oh, so, so, boring. And she would eventually have to leave that life, and him.

She couldn’t do that to him or to herself.

Aunt Rose had been a wonderful companion all these past years. She was concerned about Barbara, but never nosy. Rose gave Barbara the mothering she had never received from her own mother. Rose was contented to have Barbara live forever with her in her big old house. Barbara would find it comfortable, too, to let the years slip away with Rose.

Any of her options would be pleasant enough for Barbara, but something from her past kept tormenting her. She felt like there was more waiting for her out there, away from this college campus. Some chapter in her life had been left uncompleted. It dealt with Miles Paxton Hughes. The more she thought about him, the more he loomed on the horizon of her mind. She knew she was being foolish and impractical, but she felt that she wouldn’t be contented until she’d dealt with Miles again.

When Barbara had been a child, she’d dreamed of herself in grand settings. No lovelier princess had ever drawn breath, no fairer maiden had ever caused men to fight over her than had Barbara in her daydreams. But she figured she’d stop dreaming about a wonderful, romantic life and start living it
when she grew up. Now that she was older, she knew that some people never do stop daydreaming. There’d always be a forbidden love, a stunning career, or a wielding of power that was never quite obtainable. A person may be a failure in his life, but in his daydreams he is a success.

She’d hurt men down through the years by not loving them as much as they’d wanted. But was she really as bad a person as some of them had claimed? Did she actually leave irreparable damage in the lives she touched? Barbara had never considered herself an angel; but she’d never pictured herself as a complete scoundrel, either.

One buoy that kept her from drowning completely was thoughts of Miles Paxton Hughes. After all, she hadn’t hurt him. She’d managed to spend most of a weekend with him without leaving him bloodied. He was more popular than ever and looked happy and well-adjusted on television.

Maybe he could be her anchor. She needed something, but would he even remember her? After all, it’s been many years since they’d spent that weekend together. Had she merely been a nameless quirk who was quickly forgotten by him? That fear had hounded her home to Pennsylvania from St. Louis after Melana Clerke-Jones’ death. Of course, Miles Paxton Hughes didn’t remember Barbara! And if he ever thought about her, he probably smiled, shook his head, and was amazed at what an odd creature she’d been.

But Miles had said that they walked in dreams. He had said that they were soul mates. That was what plagued Barbara’s thoughts. What Miles talked about extended beyond physical bodies and their present lifetimes. His theories traversed the universe and spoke of never-ending time. His theories frightened Barbara. And intrigued her.

But Barbara and Miles had spent such a short time together. How could he have decided so quickly that they were soul mates? Was he cleverly insane, or the love of her life?

If she hadn’t been grasping so desperately at straws, she would’ve seen how impractical and romantic his notions were. But she wanted to believe.

Perhaps he spewed similar nonsense to other girls, and Barbara had been foolish enough to cherish his words all these years. But she wanted to believe that he would welcome her back. She’d treated him shabbily, but she wanted to believe that he would forgive all of her sins. He was her ace in the hole, the one piece of security that kept her from feeling completely alone in the world.

She wanted to believe.

Barbara had always thought that she would go back to Miles, but would she? Could she? Would she have the nerve to gamble her ace in the hole, and lose it, too?

Barbara read in a television guide that the last episode of HARRINGTON-PRICE was to be run again. Then the series would start over. Was HARRINGTON-PRICE doomed to air forever in reruns? Would the two main characters be entwined for eternity in a macabre dance of endless repeats? Even now HARRINGTON-PRICE was almost considered to be a cult show. Barbara had lost count of how many times the series had been shown in its complete cycle. And it would be shown as many times as fans would watch it. The eerie thing was that the series seemed better now than at its original airing.

It was the story lines that kept the series popular, especially the interrelationship of the two main characters. Squealing tires and double-fisted action had attracted the first viewers, but it was the stories that compelled fans to watch the shows over and over again.
It was the story content of this story that Barbara would search as she watched again the final episode. Miles had written the script. Maybe she could find some helpful clues to his nature. She’d known him once, but could she trust her memories of him? Could she recognize the Miles she had known through his writing?

Barbara settled back on Aunt Rose’s sofa and let the story envelop her.

Noah Harrington, as played by Miles Paxton Hughes, depended on shots of an antidote to keep him alive from the rare exotic disease he’d contracted. Only irascible Dr. Adam Price, as played by Sean Murphy, knew the antidote. And Price’s fee for the life-giving shot was a partnership in Noah’s detective cases so that Price could have the thrill of solving cases. Although a doctor by trade, Price was a thrill-crazed addict for the type of adventure he could get with Harrington. Neither of the two men appreciated his dependence on the other, but they gradually became allies.

Then Noah discovered that he’d been cured, but Adam had continued to give him shots that were mere vitamins so he could continue to participate in the wild adventures. In a huff, they split their partnership and went their separate ways. Noah solved his cases with his usual skill, but something was missing. Some of the thrill was gone. He took little pleasure from his success. Then he realized he needed the zing of sharing his triumph. Women didn’t understand; bartenders were noncommittal; fellow detectives wanted to talk about their own cases. Noah missed discussing the cases with Adam. He missed solving the cases with Adam. He missed the haranguing, the frustration, the battling with Adam.

He missed Adam.

Noah hadn’t wanted to admit that, but now that he had, he knew it was true. Solving cases had lost a lot of its adventure without Adam. And so had living.

They were both orphans of society, but together they had been a team, with more force than any two people working separately. They might not like to admit it, but they were each others’ best friend. At least, Noah felt that way. Adam had always kept a small part of himself aloof, as if he didn’t quite trust Noah with friendship.

Noah sucked his breath in sharply. He’d never considered himself the weaker link. Had he thrust Adam into a far more desolate world than he had done to himself when he’d walked out on Adam? Had he hurt Adam far worse than he’d hurt himself?

Of course, Adam would never admit that, Noah told himself as he drove to Adam’s house. Adam could be so stubborn! But maybe it was time Adam learned that someone else could be mule-headed, too.

When Noah reached the house, he was thunderstruck to see a For Sale sign in front of it. That didn’t make sense. Why should Adam leave? This was his home. But the grounds looked overgrown as if no one had been caring for them. Maybe Adam was already gone forever.

No. Noah could not accept that. Adam would just not walk away from this place.

Where would he be? Surely close. But, where?

There was one place--

Noah drove down to his old shack on the beach. There stood the ancient Ford pickup that Adam loved so well. His newer, shinier cars waited, unused, in the estate garage.

Adam wasn’t in the shack, and a quick glance showed he’d brought little with him: his wife’s
picture, his Gray’s Anatomy, his medical diploma. Noah picked up a photograph of him and Adam the day they went marlin fishing. Noah remembered the day well. There hadn’t been any animosity between them that day. Perhaps Adam remembered that, also. Perhaps that was why he had brought the picture with him.

A collection of papers on the desk caught Noah’s eye, and Noah laid down the snapshot of the marlin fishermen.

Noah picked up one sheet of paper and found that it had the Hippocratic Oath printed on it. Noah frowned. Handwritten notes edited the ancient oath. Adam had renamed it The Hypocritical Oath and had revised it until it burned with bitter mockery of the medical profession. How it must have torn Adam up to desecrate the sacred vows. Adam had believed every word and had made them into his life’s creed.

But what bothered Noah the most was what he found written at the bottom of the sheet of paper. ‘To whom it may concern: I am no longer worthy to be a doctor or even a human being. I have violated all that is holy to me. And what I’ve done to others for my own selfish reasons is unforgivable. Perhaps someone else could be stronger, but my strength and my will are gone. I’m sorry for what’s happened, but sometimes saying that isn’t enough. It’s too late to make amends with people I’ve hurt. Maybe I can find another way to atone for my actions.’

It sounded like a suicide note!

Where was Adam?!

Noah charged out of the shack and came face to face with Adam.

“I saw your car. I also see you’re catching up on your reading.” Adam nodded at the paper clutched in Noah’s hand. “I wouldn’t have done it, you know.”

“But you were thinking about it! And how come the house is for sale?!”

Adam brushed past Noah. “Time to move on, kiddo.”

“But you love that place better than anything else on earth!”

Adam glanced up the hill toward his estate. “It’s just a house and grounds. They can’t love me back. Took me a long time to figure that one out. They’re only empty rooms and fast growing lawns. Only other people can return love. Them, and pets.”

“You hate animals!”

“No, they hate me. No warmth. Animals can sense that, you know. You can’t fool animals.”

“And where do you think you’ll go? Anybody who knows you, won’t let you stay. And as soon as strangers get to know you, they’ll kick you out.”

“What do you care as long as I’m out of your hair?”

“How come you’re living down in my shack? Are you missing me?”

“Miss the plague? Never!”

Noah calmed himself down. “Where were you going?”

“Down in Old Mexico. They need doctors down there. No questions asked.”
“You couldn’t stand living in primitive conditions! You’d be dead in six months!”

“I’m a tough, old bird! I’m a survivor, see?”

Noah waved the crumpled paper. “Yeah, I see.”

“Okay,” Adam grumbled. “Maybe I’m just going to drive up the California coast until I come to a nice town and rent a nice apartment in a retirement center.”

“Card parties with the other retirees? Saturday night dances to Big Band music? Meals on Wheels served by a bunch of fluttery old widows fighting to see which one gets you? Playing pitch with me who can’t remember their names, let alone how the game is going.”

“Sounds great to me!”

“That’d kill you in six months, too!”

“What the hell am I supposed to do then?! Walk out into the ocean and not look back?!”

“No! Get back up that hill to your own house and do what you do best!”

“Messing up other people’s lives?!”

“If that’s what it takes; yes!”

They glared at each other.

Adam pursed his lips. “No.”

“No? No?! The Adam Price I know doesn’t know the meaning of the word ‘No’!”

“Well, this Adam Price does. Look, kid, it’s over. Maybe it should’ve never started.”

“And you’re just going to pull up stakes like that? You don’t even want to help me?”

“I’ve ‘helped’ you enough. You can solve your own cases now. Go do it.”

“I don’t want help with detective work. I’m talking about anatomy and physiology and--”

“Why those things?”

“Because I’m enrolled in medical school. I want to see if I can be half the doctor you’ve been. I’m interested in research, but I want to work and learn from one of the best. And that just isn’t my idea. UCLA says I couldn’t do any better than to learn from you. Sort of like they used to do it on an apprentice basis.”

“A research lab here on the grounds?” Adam frowned as he considered it. “Working together to help people? Going after the bad diseases instead of the bad guys?” He glanced up the cliff to where the house stood. “It might work. We could specialize and eventually bring in other good researchers. These grounds could become a branch of UCLA. We could even start a great research hospital.”

“Yeah! Yeah!”

“Nah.”

“Why not?! We can do great things together.”
“Look, kid, you got this all wrong--”

“You’ve got the strength to work under primitive conditions in Old Mexico, but you can’t work with me? You can live around a bunch of fluttery old women in a musty retirement center, and you can’t live around me?!”

“Nothing would give me greater pleasure, but I don’t have the heart for it now.” He breathed deeply. “Truth is, I can’t stand to hurt you again, kid.”

“Then, don’t! We won’t let it happen. Throw in with me again. Trust me, will you? I’ll protect myself. Besides, I might be the one who’s been hurting you. Did you ever consider that?”

Adam squinted into the glare of the sun. “Yeah, I did. And I know why. And it’s corny.”

“Sad and funny and nice and--”

“And true.” Adam could not quite look at the younger man. “I didn’t want anybody to get to me like that again, not after I lost my wife and son. But you, ah, have.” He looked away with disgust.

Noah grinned shyly. “It’s not a sign of weakness, you know. It only shows you’re human. And you are human, Doc, even if you don’t want to admit it. So, you see, that’s why the folks down in Old Mexico and the fluttery widows up the California coast will just have to do without you. You’re going to be too busy right where you’re at.”

“It’s no good, kid.”

“Why not? There would be two of us working on it. What’s wrong? Don’t you trust me?”

“Sure, I do. You’ve pulled my bacon out of the fire lots of times.”

“I mean, with your feelings.”

“You do have a mouth on you, kid. You can get pretty sharp with your comments.”

“Would it make you feel vulnerable to be around me? Do you think I’d take advantage of the power you’ve given me? Or lose respect for you? Do you think you’d be less in my eyes?”

“Whoa! You go like a machine guy once you get started, don’t you?”

“What is it, Doc? Is this to keep me off balance? Or am I just not worth the effort?”

“Of course, you’re worth the effort--”

“I can be just your little tin soldier, if that’s what you want. I’ll do anything,” he added softly. “Just as long as we stay together.”

“For starters, that smart mouth of yours would prevent robot behavior. For another, well, for another, I wouldn’t want it. I put down the rules when we teamed up and you bucked me every inch of the way. And I’m glad you did. I got more than I bargained for and a whole lot better than what I deserved. If you walked out of my life today, I’d feel lucky for the time we had together.”

“Then, why? Why don’t you even want to try?” Noah asked in a choked voice.

“Maybe I don’t trust myself,” Adam whispered. “You gave me more friendship than I’ve had in a long while. And all the time, I didn’t deserve it. I just can’t do that to you again.” Then in a stronger voice, he added, “Besides, it’s just time to part the waves, go by the wayside, you know.” He
shrugged. “Split up.”


“Don’t go off all moody like that!”

“Then how the hell am I supposed to act!” Noah demanded as he turned back to Adam with anger and disgust pouring off himself. “What am I supposed to do when my best friend pushes me away, and won’t even try to fix things between us? Don’t you know how miserable I’ve been since we had that argument? You let me get next to you, Doc, and that’s going to take a long time to get over. I know we weren’t friends at first, but I thought we’d gotten beyond that. I know I had. And I felt lucky that I was the only person you’d let get that close in a long time. I thought you knew how important you were to me, too.” He bit his mouth shut, knowing he’d made himself too vulnerable. “How could you not know how I felt?” he whispered.

“Look, kid, I’m not that thick-headed, or that insensitive.” Adam frowned. “I know what you want to hear from me, but guys don’t go around saying things like that to each other, you know?”

“I just need to know something, though, and then I’ll let it rest.” Noah scuffed his foot, sending rocks flying. “I need to know if any good feelings you’ve ever had about me is equal to say--” He nudged a small rock with his toe. “--this pebble.”

“What pebble?”

“That pebble.”

“Oh. Not that pebble. No, no way.” Adam turned away.

“Okay,” Noah said with disappointment in his voice. “I guess I know the score now, don’t? Well, I’ll see you around then. Enjoy the twittering old ladies up the coast.”

Adam tossed a rock about the size of a baseball toward him, and it bounced along the ground to land at Noah’s feet.

Noah frowned back at Adam. “You’re throwing rocks at me now?”

“You asked me a question about pebbles.”

Noah started to grin.

Adam jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “I can’t lug that boulder over here, so that rock I tossed at you will have to do. Pebbles, Hell! No sense us messing around with pebbles, unless you got a whole truck load of them.” He narrowed his eyes. “But don’t let it go to your head.”

Noah felt impish. “I won’t.”

Adam pointed a finger at him. “And if you take one more step toward me, I’ll deck you.”

Noah’s grin broadened, but he stopped. For an old man, Adam had a powerful punch. “A boulder, eh?”

“At least. Well, now you know.”

“You’re something.”

“Of course, I am. But, so are you. Comes from being around me.”
“You’re sure about that?”

“As sure as I’ve ever been about anything. You know, my Spanish is too rusty for Old Mexico and the fluttery widows just might be able to kill me with kindness. I’d better stick around someone who’ll keep me awake. I’m warning you, though. I’ll keep you awake, too.”

“That’s what I’m counting on,” Noah replied with a soft smile.

Adam rubbed his chin. “A research doctor, eh? That will take a lot of training.”

“That’s why I’ve come to the best teacher.”

“Well, we better get started then.” He clapped his hand on Noah’s shoulder and steered him ahead. “First, we’ll go take down that For Sale sign. This place is going to stay in the family for a long time.”

Noah and Adam grinned at each other, and then looked up the hill toward the house that they both loved.

The camera lifted up the steep hill to the estate, the theme song rose in volume, and the credits started rolling. And so ended the last episode of HARRINGTON-PRICE.

Barbara snapped off the television and sank into deep thought. She now understood why she’d stopped in St. Louis and not finished her trip to California and to Miles. She’d been going only to his love and realized in time that wasn’t enough. She needed his help and insight more than his love. She needed his friendship, the kind of friendship that Noah had offered to Adam.

Would Miles have as much compassion as Noah? Was Miles good material for a friend, or just a good actor? Could Miles understand her motives as well as Noah had understood Adam’s, or was Noah just a good writer? Did his insight spill over into real life?

Barbara knew that the questions would continue to plague her.

Several days later Barbara sat looking at a wrinkled scrap of paper in her hand. Generally, she forgot she still had it until she found it back. Yesterday, she’d dug it out on purpose.

Several times over the past years she had almost tossed the scrap away, but she always returned it to the deep corner of her purse. Now she held it again with indecision in her heart. On it was written the telephone number for the rented house used by Miles Paxton Hughes in California.

During that chaste weekend she’d spent with him, she’d idly jotted down his telephone number. Once, months later, she had dialed the number to see if he still lived there. His voice said, “Hughes residence. I’m not home right now, but--” She softly cradled the phone.

Once, she dialed the number and he answered instead of his machine, but she couldn’t talk. “Hello? Is anybody there? Listen, people like you are sick!” He slammed the receiver.

Now, once again, Barbara dialed the number. Of course, he would’ve changed the number by now. Famous people have to do that. Of course, he would’ve moved to a nicer home by now. Famous people have to do that, too. But, maybe, once and forever, she could throw the scrap of paper away. Once and forever, Miles would be out of her life. All he had to do was not answer his ringing telephone.
“Hughes residence.” A pause. “Is anybody there?”

She could see him getting disgusted and start to hang up again. He had no way of knowing his caller couldn’t breathe and possessed hands that had suddenly turned to ice.

“Miles, wait,” she managed to croak.

“Who is this? I’m warning you. I just turned on a tape recorder.”

Barbara had heard the click of the recorder.

“In just about five seconds, I’m hanging up. So, if you have something to say, you better be spitting it out.”

“Miles, please. Be patient.”

“Who is this?”

“A friend. A soul mate.”

“I bet!”

She could hear the disgust in his voice. So many things needed to be said. Her mind was so full. She couldn’t write to him. A letter would get mixed up with his fan mail, and he might never read it. She wished he could learn what she had to say to him telepathically. Then she wouldn’t have to explain. Where to start? What to say so he wouldn’t hang up?

“I, I’m so mixed up, Miles.”

“Since when?” he asked sarcastically and gave her the cue she needed.

“Since I Fell For You.”

“What?” His voice sounded hollow.

“Don’t you remember? That’s the song I sang at the piano bar? Remember the sun rising out of the Mojave Desert on Sunday morning? I made pancakes from Bisquik and wore your sister’s clothes. Miles.” She paused. “Have you found the Land of Plastic Roosters yet? I’ve wondered so many times if you have.”

“My God, it’s you!” Awe echoed in his voice. “Bambi, don’t hang up! Whatever you do, stay with me!”

“You know I’m Bambi? How?”

“Voice comparison. I took a clip of Bambi on the news and your video helping me with the script, recorded them both on audio tape, and had a cop friend compare them. They matched.”

“So all this time, you knew?”

“Not until after Bambi disappeared, and the furor started. Everyone thought that Bambi Love was dead, and I blamed myself. I thought I might’ve somehow saved you. The loss of Bambi and my nameless friend overwhelmed me.”

“How did you figure it out?”
“You told me, remember? After the concert when I got to meet Bambi Love. You strung out all those key phrases like you just did. But nothing clicked until Bambi disappeared. I thought, here I am plagued by two mystery women who are both great singers. Or is she only one person? The possibility blew my mind. And when I learned I was right, I wanted to wring your neck. And then I wanted to hold you and tell you that I’d help you fight whatever demon was driving you away. Because, no matter what anybody else said, I felt that you were alive out there, somewhere, and needing me. I just wanted the chance to help. I’ve always hoped that someday you’d call. That’s why I’ve never changed my telephone number on this line. But so many months went by, and then years. And still there was no word--”

“I’m sorry I’ve caused you any unrest.”

“You should be! But that’s over. We go on from here.”

“I tried several times to call you. Once I flew as far as Missouri before I turned around and came home. I didn’t know how welcomed I’d be back in your life.”

“I wish you could’ve trusted me more. Whatever is wrong, I’ll listen and try to be helpful and fair. I just want the chance. There’s so many questions I want to ask. I don’t even know who you are. You’re not Bambi. I know you were only playing Bambi. What’s your real name?”

She owed him that much. “Barbara. Barbara Crider. I had to become Bambi Love because the group I sang with had two Barbaras singing backup. I lost a coin toss and became Bambi Love.”

“Barbara Crider,” he repeated, as if he were savoring the words. “That’s a nice, sensible, everyday name. Sounds like someone I’d like to spend a weekend with.”

They both laughed in relief and had the feeling of two people becoming acquainted on a first date.

“Thanks for not telling anyone who I really was. A video of the real me would’ve blown my cover immediately.”

“But why did you have to disappear? Couldn’t I have helped?”

“It’s a long story, Miles, and I want to tell you all about it someday. Just let me say that at the time I disappeared, I wasn’t thinking too clearly. I made some unwise choices. I’ve grown up since I knew you, but I’ve been so lonesome in my life, too.”

“Where are you, Barbara? Can I help now?”

“Just hearing your voice helps. It has such a calming effect.”

“I could come to you--”

“No!” she commanded in alarm. “I’m not ready to face you. And don’t try to trace my call. I’m out of state and I can disappear before you get close to me.”

“And you’re a master of disguise, too. I could pass you on the street and not know you. Hell, for all I know, I probably have!”

“Miles, I wouldn’t play those kinds of games with you. Not now.”

“Then what are you planning to do? Drop into my life every few years and stir me up? Then disappear again? I can’t live that way, Barbara!”
"I was wrong. I shouldn’t have called--"

"No, honey! Please don’t hang up! Please. Oh, honey, please. Please stay on the line. You gotta listen. I can’t stand the thought of you out there alone. Listen. Listen to me, Barbara. Let me help you."

"I don’t want to complicate your life."

"You wouldn’t be a complication. I’m divorced from Merlin. I have a thirteen-year-old son who spends time with me now, and we’re getting acquainted. It’s rough for both of us, but we’re going to make it."

"So you don’t need two confusions right now."

"I look at it differently. You and I might be able to help each other."

She smiled. "Still the romantic. And you’re helping Sean, too."

"That’s a sad story. He misses Melana so much. Just when he’s semi-retired and they could start working less, he loses her in that senseless way."

"He’s got his children."

"Those kids!" Miles hooted. "Both sets fight against the other set. They’re jealous as crows. They’re different in age and ethnic background. Their only similarity is that Sean is their father. And each one is busy in his own career and family. But it looks like the older daughter Molly is headed for divorce. Sean isn’t worried about her. He says she’s tough like Midge, her mother. He’s concerned about Molly’s daughter, though. Callie is eleven and trying to act tough, but Sean and I can see otherwise. The poor kid’s eaten up with doubt and insecurity. And neither of her parents wants her. They’ve never come out and said it, of course, but it’s pretty clear how they feel. I think Sean is going to take Callie in. He’s about ready to leave his ranch. Too many memories of Melana live out there. His son Stephen may take over the place."

"But where will Sean and Callie go?"

"That’s the kicker! He’s thinking of buying the beach house next to mine! I own mine now. We could build a breezeway between the two places and still be in separate houses. We’d be just a few steps apart."

"Sounds like you’re building more than a breezeway."

"You’re right. We’re building a family. Separately, we’re all lost, but together—And the beauty of it is we can add any number. You’d be welcome, Barbara."

"Well—"

"If you were happy where you are, you wouldn’t have called me."

"Where I am is familiar. And I like the idea of coming to California. It would be a sanctuary. That place could be so many things to us. Remember, you once told me it could be a prison to you?"

"Not if the people I love are here with me."

"Miles, you don’t love me. You don’t even know me. We’re not the same people we were eight years ago."
“That might be for the best, honey. Maybe this time we could fall in love. I’m ready for a relationship.”

“Oh, Miles, you romantic slob—”

“Barbara, I’d like to try. Really, I would.”

“That’s the problem, Miles. We’d be trying too hard. That weekend we spent together was a quirk. It wasn’t real. People don’t live in a vacuum like that.”

“Of course, we don’t. I’d want you to be your own person as much as you wanted to be. Your voice is too lovely to waste. We’d be a show biz family. You’d be as free as Melana was. Sean knew that was the only way he could keep her. But in the end, he couldn’t keep her, after all. It was so sad what happened to her. Dying in the streets of St. Louis like that with only strangers around her. I wish somebody who knew her had been with her. I think that we would’ve felt better knowing that much.” He frowned, and his concern came over the telephone line. “Barbara, what’s wrong? Are you crying? What’s wrong, honey?”

“Miles, I was there.”

“Where? What are you talking about?”

“I was in St. Louis when Melana was hit by that car. We crossed the street together. I was one of the women with her.”

A pause. “Oh, Barbara—”

“I didn’t know she was there! The corner was crowded. There were several women in my group. I didn’t even look at them. They were just women. I made it across, but it could’ve been me who got struck. Miles, I heard the car hit her. I still can hear the car hit her. I always will.”

“God—”

“We rushed up to her, another woman and I. Melana was trying to say something. I knelt and touched her arm. She whispered something that sounded like Sean’s name, then she died. I saw the spirit leave her body. Someone looked in her purse and said that she was Melana Clerke-Jones. And I said, ‘Sean’s wife!’ People gave me odd looks. ‘The actor, Sean Murphy. Miles’ friend.’ That really got odd looks. ‘Harrington-Price, you culturally deprived idiots!’ Any other time it would’ve been funny, but everyone was in shock, especially me.”

“Oh, Barbara, how awful.”

“I can’t face Sean. I didn’t help Melana. If I would’ve grabbed her hand and rushed her across that street— If I would’ve introduced myself and taken her for coffee— But I didn’t do any of that. I let her die!”

“Barbara, it wasn’t your fault. Listen to me, sweetheart. The driver of the car was trying to kill his wife. Apparently she was a sour, demanding person who henpecked her husband and was so wrapped up in herself that she cared little for others. She was a creature of habit, though, and was supposed to be crossing the street at that time to visit her doctor. It was a rainy day and the husband must’ve mistaken Melana’s raincoat for his wife’s. The two women were about the same size. Someone who saw her said Melana was walking awkwardly, maybe because of the slick streets. Nobody knows for sure.”

“That’s right! I remember.”
“Anyway, it’s the same way the guy’s wife would’ve been walking because she suffers from arthritis. The wife was on the curb and recognized her husband’s car. Five blocks later he skidded on the wet pavement and piled up on a steel post. You don’t walk away from that sort of wreck.”

“I didn’t know. I left St. Louis as soon as I could. What a horrible memory for that poor wife to be carrying around.”

“You’re right. She felt guilty, not only for Melana’s death but for the trauma caused to the other women involved. Mrs. Miller, that’s the name of the wife, wanted to reach those women and apologize, but she was afraid they wouldn’t have anything to do with her. She desperately needs to know that they haven’t been permanently scarred. It’s given her something different to think about besides herself, and her arthritis doesn’t seem so bad when she’s thinking of other people. Can you imagine what comfort you’d give her by letting her help you?”

“To face her after all this time? To bring back all those memories? Oh, Miles, I don’t think I could.”

“But she needs a catharsis for her guilt. She’s looking for some way to atone for the tragedy. She needs to bring it all out in the open so the effects of the accident on the other women can be examined. I think it would help you, too.”

“That day is never too far from my conscious mind, Miles. I’ll never forget Melana’s poor body lying there on that wet street with those scattered all over her. I’ll always be able to hear her calling to Sean.”

“It would mean so much to him if you could tell him of Melana’s last moments. He would love you for being with her and comforting her and for telling him that Melana’s last thoughts were of him. He would be forever in your debt.”

“But I don’t deserve his thanks!”

“As Sean’s friend, I’m asking that you talk to him.”

“Don’t you understand?! It could’ve been me killed that day! I was sorry Melana was dead, but I was so damned happy it wasn’t me. And ever since, I’ve felt guilty about being alive.”

“Survivor’s guilt.“

“They even have a name for it?“

“Yes. It’s common. So, honey, you mustn’t feel bad that you lived, and she didn’t. You have to forgive yourself. It’s only natural that you’d be happy to be alive.” He cradled the phone against his face as if in some way that action could soothe her. “I know you’re hurting, honey. I wish I was there to hold you in my arms. I really do.”

The physical ache she felt for that promised comfort overwhelmed her. “That day in St. Louis when Melana was killed, I was coming to you then. I’d stopped to see the sights, or so I thought. Maybe I was getting cold feet. Maybe I was looking for an excuse to turn back and found a reason when the accident happened. I came running back to—” She paused. “To where I’m living. I found a hole, got in it, and tried to pull the hole in after me, as the expression goes. But it’s no good here, not after I’ve talked to you again. Miles, you don’t know how tempting it’d be for me to be walking on the beach with you and Bruiser right now.”

“I lost Bruiser last year.”

“Oh, Miles, I’m so sorry. He was a wonderful dog.”
“And a wonderful friend. But I have another dog. He’s named Bowzer. He’s just as big and ugly and hard-mouthed as Bruiser was. He’s a Chesapeake, too, of course.”

“Do you love Bowzer for himself?” It seemed very important for her to know.

“I try. Sometimes I forget, but I remind myself how badly I’d feel if someone expected me to be a substitute.”

Barbara closed her eyes in thanksgiving. Bambi Love could be exorcised from her forever. There might be no further need of her alter ego with Miles.

“Barbara? Are you still there?”

“Yes,” she murmured through her smile.

“This phone call is costing you a fortune. Take the next flight out. Or let me come to you.”

“You? Here?! Oh, Miles, I’m frightened. This is happening too fast.”

“Not for me. I’ve waited too long for you now. Besides, there’s nothing for you where you’re at, or else you would not have called. Barbara, I realize you must’ve been hurt in the past and are afraid of the future. I can understand how you’re feeling. You’ve apparently be through a lot and just need to rest in someone for awhile. Let me be brave for both of us, honey. Depend on someone else for a change.”

“I don’t want us to be together for all the wrong reasons.”

“Then let’s find a right reason. It might not work out between us, but let’s try. I think we can be great friends. And if nothing else comes of it, we’ll still have that friendship. Besides, you need to get your singing career going again; and Hollywood’s the best place for that. Let me be your sanctuary, Barbara. We might even discover that you’ll be MY salvation. We’ll cherish those people we were eight years ago, but we’ll work with the people we are now. I want you in my life more than once every few years. Listen to me, Barbara. I know that we live in a crazy world. There’s a lot of heartache in it, too. But sometimes something good does happen to us. Sometimes everything comes out right. Those are the true miracles, Barbara. Besides, I’m not such a bad guy when you get to know me.” Warmth was in his voice. “And unlike that weekend we shared, I might even let you do some of the talking.”

Equal warmth was in her voice. “You make an awfully tempting offer, mister.”

“And do you know the real beauty of this conversation?”

“What?”

“It’s all down on tape. We can listen to it together. Imagine doing that on our fiftieth anniversary. Listen, honey, a jet plane can get us together in a few hours. Then we can talk this whole thing out. Tell me now, do you have anything better planned for this weekend?”

“I can’t think of a thing,” she answered and knew that he could hear the happiness and relief in her voice.

“Good!”

With tears shimmering in her eyes, she vowed she would try. She vowed to be good for him. She couldn’t keep on hurting people forever, could she? Perhaps someone as vulnerable as Miles would
be no challenge for her evil side. Perhaps, with his faith and trust in her, she could rid herself of the evil inside her forever. Perhaps, with him, there would be no resurrection of Bambi Love or of the evil that Bambi had created and represented. Perhaps Miles could even convince Barbara that she wasn’t such a bad person, after all.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Miles. Oh, Miles, tomorrow—”

“Tomorrow,” he repeated firmly. Already he sounded strong enough for both of them.
EPILOGUE

EPILOGUE

ACTOR’S WIFE KILLED

Melana Clerke-Jones, 42, wife of actor Sean Murphy, was killed in a hit-and-run accident as she crossed a rain-slick street in downtown St. Louis Friday. A car driven by Herbert Miller, 69, St. Louis, struck Mrs. Murphy, then traveled five blocks before crashing into a steel post. Mr. Miller died at the scene. Witnesses said his car deliberately struck Mrs. Murphy. Eileen Miller, 68, wife of the driver, was preparing to cross the street when the mishap occurred. Police surmise that Mr. Miller may have mistaken Mrs. Murphy for his wife in the rainy weather.

Melana Clerke-Jones was founder and president of Dance International. She was a native of Cape Town, South Africa, and first became known for her role of a Madagascar dancing girl in the movie LIBERTALIA. She co-starred with Sean Murphy whom she later married. Murphy recently received the Life Achievement Award for his long career in movies and television.

Police questioned the other persons who crossed the street with Mrs. Murphy, but they could offer little information. Those questioned were identified as Jessie Horne, Nashville, Tenn., Barbara Crider, Colden, Penn., and Priscilla Carey, New York City, New York, whose photo appears above. A teenage girl was reported running from the scene, but police were unable to learn her identity. Anyone knowing anything about her identity or whereabouts is urged to notify the proper authorities.

The newspaper article is yellowed now and the corners are starting to fray and curl. Words recorded the event, but not the immediate anguish or the long term effects on the survivors. Someday, nothing will remain but the terse article. Human emotions of the event can only be imagined. Some new tragedy will replace it. Such is life.

The death of one woman (Melana) affected the women immediately with her in various ways. The brutality and ugliness of the death awakened savageries lying hidden by mores of society in the psyche of one (Mary Grace). One woman (Jessie) discovered she wasn’t as wicked or complacent as she thought. Another woman (Barbara), thinking herself a victim, learned that evil actually stemmed from her. For one (Priscilla), nothing really changed although it appeared to do so. The emptiness of her life simply crushed down harder on her. And for one (Eileen), the death led to salvation. She sought out the other five women and saved herself by learning their stories and writing them down.

Yes, six women stood on a street corner in St. Louis that rainy day one early spring afternoon. Five of them have been chronicled in the pages of this book. And what of Eileen Miller, the sixth woman and the intended victim of the hit-and-run driver?

That was me.

THE END
End Notes

It is no coincidence if the reader thinks of Hardcastle and McCormick when reading about the television show Harrington-Price. The character of Adam Price is based on Milton C. Hardcastle, and the character of Noah Harrington is based on Mark McCormick. Likewise the character of Sean Murphy is based on Brian Keith, and the character of Miles Paxton Hughes is based on Daniel Hugh Kelly.
I own nothing of the Hardcastle and McCormick television show, nor do I represent the estate of the late Brian Keith nor the enterprises of the actor Daniel Hugh Kelly. I am just a fan paying homage to a wonderful series and two consummate actors.

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